

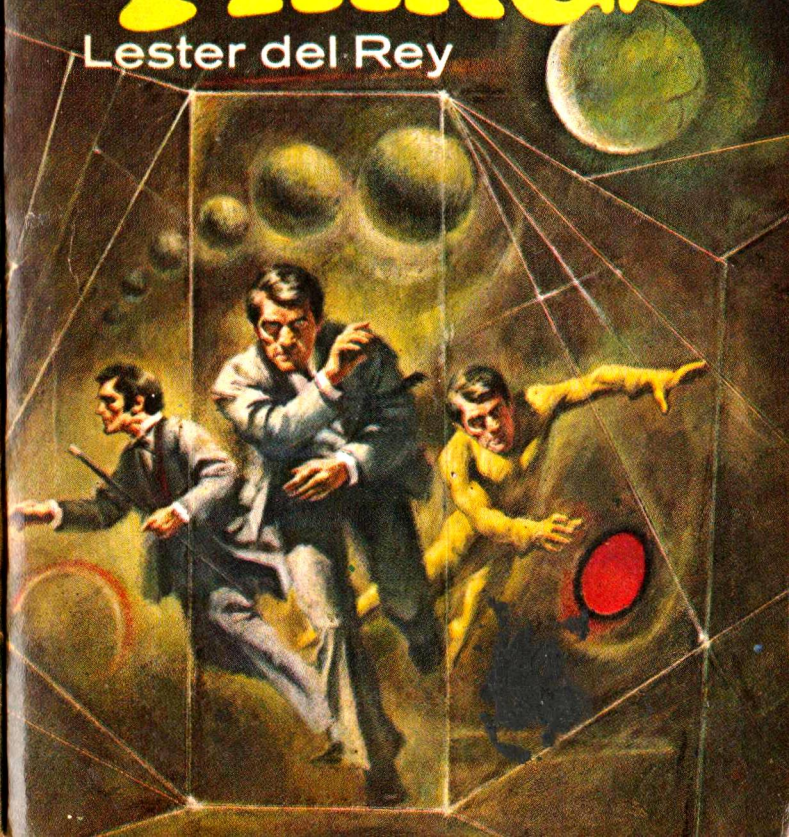
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Can a man really live—and
die—more than once????

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

Lester del Rey



O S F I C
Ont. Science Fiction Club
594 Markham St., Tor.

It began again when the class disappeared. But that wasn't the most frightening part of it. Things were further complicated by what appeared in its place. Something did appear, but Mike Strong, Assistant Professor of Logic at Kane University, wasn't sure what it was. All the bright, eager young faces were there; then they were gone.

Gone—and in their place, a thing of contradictions and paradoxes—real and unreal; both vague and sharply outlined; frightening, but at the same time, strangely exhilarating. . . .

It resumed like this—the strange displacement into another consciousness; he had known what it was like since he was a boy. But now it was to be more real and terrifying than ever. He had to know what it meant . . .

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THE SCHEME OF THINGS

Lester del Rey

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**THE SCHEME
OF
THINGS**

I

IT BEGAN when the class disappeared.

But that wasn't the most frightening part of it. Things were further complicated by what appeared in its place. Something did appear. But Mike Strong, Assistant Professor of Logic at Kane University, wasn't sure what it was. It was no lapse into temporary unconsciousness like a maiden with the vapors; nothing like that. All the bright eager young faces were there; then they were gone; along with all the bored uninterested young faces too, for that matter; and the seats and the desks and the classroom itself.

Gone—and in their place, a thing of contradictions and paradoxes—real and unreal; both vague and sharply outlined; frightening, but at the same time, strangely exhilarating.

The lapse was brief. At least it seemed so to Mike. The class was still present when he "returned" to his desk,

although it was in the process of breaking up, his students moving toward the door.

He checked them sharply. "Who dismissed you?"

They paused to stare blankly, Lathan Mott finally speaking for them. Mott, an indifferent student but a promising fugitive from some high school athletic field, regarded Mike as though he'd just called a football signal in Congolese.

"You did," Mott said.

The moment had embarrassing possibilities. The class continued to regard Mike curiously as he strove for a face-saving rejoinder. He almost blurted, *I did?* But then he caught himself. He spoke icily.

"But I didn't suggest charging out of here like a herd of elephants."

They pondered this, looked at each other with innocent, *Who, me?* expressions on their faces. Then they charged out of the classroom like a herd of elephants.

Mike was happy to see them go. He needed time to pull himself together. More frightened than excited now, he searched for comparatives and found none. But the vagueness of his lapse clarified slightly.

However, the clarification was even more frightening. Lathan Mott. He recalled seeing Lathan during the interlude he now refused to concede as a dream. Lathan had been stripped to the waist. There had been blood on his chest and a look of grim defiance on his face. As Mike stood watching, an observer now where he had been a participant before, he saw Lathan Mott pick up a submachine gun and fire a burst into what had been previously clear to Mike but was now a fog. A scream of death and agony came out of the fog and then Mike lost the whole thing and he was again sitting at his desk.

A man with a mental cancer?

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The thought came to him as he got up and strode out of the classroom.

Outside, he paused on the walk and looked out across the campus. The logical conclusion—*You're cracking up*—came again. He struggled with it, trying to attach himself to the quiet, well-ordered reality around him. Kane University was functioning smoothly in a mathematically precise world. All he had to do was to hang on tight and let the world spin the nonsense out of his skull.

He forced a quiet smile. The crazy image of blonde, broad-shouldered young Lathan Mott wanted to come back and reestablish itself, but Mike drove it away. Slamming his mental door against it, he planned his evening—planned it like a newly released paraplegic shaping his first steps.

He would go home to his bachelor apartment on Faculty Row. He would have a drink. He would phone Donna. Simple, safe, satisfying. Anchoring his smile tighter, he went about it. But—

—he wasn't phoning Donna. He was calling Vera to reassure her because it was already six o'clock and she wanted to get to the theater early to have it out with Vladimir Solonoff.

Vera was dressing when he got home and he kissed the classic curve of her neck. "Did you get some rest today, dear?"

Vera was in a dramatic mood. "Rest? Are you insane? How could I relax with that Russian slob waiting to walk all over my lines tonight?"

"Darling, I think perhaps you're not asserting yourself. After all, you're the star of *'Far Bugles.'* He wouldn't dare use such tactics on Davis or Crawford."

"You dare to mention those hams—"

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"I'm sorry," Mike said hastily. "But Solonoff—"

"He's so damnedably clever! He'll fall over his own feet protesting innocence. Then he'll go onstage and blow cigarette smoke all over me!"

"But Max is a good director. All you have to do is mention it to him and Max will clobber Solonoff. Your name on the marquee is the important one."

Vera waved her arms dramatically. "You have such simple answers for everything. You sit in your plush office all day ordering people to fetch and carry. You have no concept of how I've fought and struggled to get where I am."

This seemed a little irrelevant but Mike was indulgent. He loved Vera. He loved her flashing moods and quick changes. The sunshine and storm of her awed him. She was fire and ice. Her bursts of temperament were like the flashing of neon lights and he was the luckiest of men for having married her.

One of the columnists had quoted a former husband as having said, "A week with Vera Spain is far, far more precious than a lifetime with an ordinary woman." Mike agreed.

"Darling," he said, "I've let you handle this thing yourself, but now I think it's time I took a hand. I'll have a word with Solonoff tonight."

Vera leaped up from her vanity table and rushed into Mike's arms. "Oh, my sweet! How brave of you!"

After she kissed him, Mike blinked. "Brave, I don't quite see where valor is involved. I don't expect to duel with the man."

"If necessary, you must smash his beautiful face," Vera demanded fiercely.

"I don't think that will be necessary. I do have the

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major financial interest in the production. I think that puts me in quite an advantageous spot."

Vera snuggled into his lap like an ecstatic kitten. "Oh, how delightful it will be—to see that cad cringe before my handsome knight."

"Angel," Mike laughed, "I'm afraid you're getting your fantasies and realities mixed up."

Mike confronted the Russian, Solonoff, at the theater that evening. He'd suggested to Vera that he see the man alone but when he tapped on Solonoff's door and was invited to enter, Vera was right behind him.

Solonoff was at his dressing table. He turned to exhibit the artistocratic bearing for which he was famous. At first, he saw only Mike and his contempt was supreme, a perfect demonstration of the blood prince regarding the money-grubbing tradesman. The fact that Mike had backed the show obviously did not impress the haughty actor.

"We may as well get right to it," Mike said, not unpleasantly. "You've been causing my wife a great deal of distress by your calculated—"

At this point, Solonoff saw Vera peeking around the edge of the door and he sprang to his feet. He was transformed instantly into a figure of tragedy.

"Oh, my golden dove! How could you do this to me?"

Mike was swept backward by Solonoff's dramatic lunge toward the door. As he stared, Solonoff seized Vera's hand and drew her into the room. Holding her hand as though it were a piece of rare Ming china, he dropped to one knee.

"Now wait a minute," Mike objected. "Vera, if you'll just go to your dressing room, I'll settle this thing and—"

Vera didn't appear to hear him. Her look of smug

satisfaction was directed downward, toward Solonoff's tragic face. "I told you to stop wet-nursing that stupid little brunette—"

"But it is all your imagination, my sweet! In the blazing light of your golden beauty—"

"You were in her dressing room for an hour after the matinee yesterday!"

"But only to coach her on that second act entrance, my dearest. If you'll remember, she practically tripped you—"

"I can take care of myself on the stage, and I'll thank you to remember that!"

With Solonoff still on one knee and Vera making no effort to disengage her hand, Mike came out of his shock. "Now just a minute! What is all this?"

It was as though he had been brought along to act the part of the objective observer. Neither his wife nor this Russian clown paid him the least attention. Solonoff put passionate lips to Vera's hand and was clear up to her shoulder before Mike reacted. But when his reaction did come, there was nothing casual about it. He grabbed Solonoff by the collar and jerked him to his feet. Solonoff's expression changed. It said, *Remove your filthy hand from my collar, oaf.*

Solonoff's misfortune was in having too expressive a face. It said other things Mike refused to accept. Still holding Solonoff by his collar, Mike doubled his right fist and swung it. His knuckles skidded off the point of the Russian's jaw and Solonoff staggered backward and went down. There was a distressing *klunk* as his skull connected with the wrought iron leg of a ridiculously ornate telephone stand. The impact dislodged the instrument also and it banged down on his aristocratic face.

Vera screamed and dropped down beside him. She

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pushed the phone away and kissed both of the closed, long-lashed eyes. Then she turned her fury on Mike.

"You brutal! You utter beast! It was only a small difference between us! You didn't have to assault him!"

As Mike stared, Vera plastered kisses all over the still face. "Oh, my darling! Speak to me!"

And it seemed to Mike that Solonoff, in a voice far more Brooklynese than Russian, muttered, "Who dropped the set on me?"

But Mike couldn't be sure of that because all he saw was a typical small college campus on a typical late afternoon, with typical students going here and there.

Two of them, he thought, greeted him, but he wasn't sure about that either. He was sure, however, that they both turned to stare at him. They were probably wondering about the odd look on his face. What could a man be scared of on a safe, placid college campus on a bright and sunny afternoon?

Without stopping to inform them, Mike went straight across it and into Faculty Row. He passed his own apartment and strode to the far end and rang the bell beside the white door of the last house.

While he waited, he began to count. "One—two—three—four—"

Yes, time did seem to pass. The spaces between the words definitely approximated seconds. Out on the campus, the trees stayed firmly rooted both in soil and passing moments and the symphonic murmuring of the leaves had a cadence, each whisper following the previous whisper in an orderly stream.

The door opened . . .

2

"So I ~~LOST~~ a wife I didn't even know I had and punched a character who'd taken her away from me in a theater ~~production~~ ~~from before.~~"

~~After making~~ that statement, Mike gulped at his ~~stomach~~ ~~and~~ and waited for Paul Bender's comment. ~~It came in due course.~~

"You've been a busy little man."

"Plouso, Paul. I'm serious. This thing's got me scared silly."

"I don't blame you, but let's keep the blood pressure down and see what we can figure out."

Paul Bender was the *prestige* member of Kane's faculty. By merely being there, he got the college jots and tittles of publicity it could never have merited otherwise. He knew as much about space age technology—theoretical and practical—as any living man, and far more than perhaps a scant dozen or so. He owned pat-

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ents on such curious things as airborne sensor stabilizers and isolators and inertial reference analyzers that were the envy of giant corporations. His genius circled the moon and went to Venus in the form of supersensitive gadgetry that made the trips possible.

But he'd spent only a minor part of his sixty-five years in fussing with such absolutes. As a young man he'd acquired his first financial success by superintending a small revolution in Central America.

He then went on to larger ones on the South American continent proper, and then retired from righting political wrongs because he found it to be a fruitless business. Nothing was ever really solved by violently heaving out the *ins*.

Besides, he had made a good deal of money at it and he wanted to be a musician. It took him four years to become really accomplished at the piano and the cello. To prove his grasp of the instruments, he wrote music for both—irritating, mocking compositions that went into most professional portfolios but were seldom played.

Then he went to India to find out exactly why those people felt singularly honored when cows wandered into their homes and evacuated on their floors. This led him down many happy bypaths and his years kited by.

Paul Bender would have been welcomed to the faculty of any college or university in the world. Why he chose insignificant little Kane was a question he refused to answer at press gatherings but it was certainly indicative of his complete contempt for public honor.

When he arrived at Kane, he selected his friends by rebuffing those petitioners for the honor who didn't qualify. The ones he did select were supposed to be friends in every respect. He hated being looked up to above all other dislikes. And it followed of course,

that Mike Strong saw his acceptance by Bender as a precious thing.

Bender smoked the strongest tobacco known to man and as Mike peered through the cloud around Bender's chair to see if he were still there, Mike said, "I imagine you can prove, in a few incisive words, that it was all a momentary daydream."

"Is that what you're hoping for?"

"Not necessarily. But I would like some assurance that I haven't gone off a weird deep end."

"It seems to me it must have been quite an experience. Tell me more about it."

"That's one of the problems. I know so little."

"About this other life you're living on a different plane—"

"I haven't got the foggiest idea of any such life. Except for the incident itself, I know nothing about it. At the time, from what was said, I assume I had money. I was married to Vera Spain, whoever she was, and I must have been seven kinds of an idiot because she was obviously carrying on an affair with that Russian character right under my nose."

"Have you talked to your psychiatrist?"

"No, and I see no point in doing so. He's busy right now trying to convince me that I hated my father. He'd be certain to call this thing an hallucination and start digging into my id."

"Did you hate your father?"

"I didn't hate him. But I didn't think much of him, either."

"Do you think it was an hallucination?"

"No. It was too real. There was none of the haziness of a dream. Maybe that's not quite the word, but you know what I mean, Paul. When you awaken from a

dream, you automatically know that you've been dreaming and that you've returned to reality. What I went through was just as real as sitting here talking to you."

"Maybe you aren't sitting here. Maybe this is the dream."

Paul Bender had a deeply lined, heavily tanned face. His thick white hair looked like a halo, one he certainly did not merit, and his eyes were so clear blue and so young that they contradicted all the other indications of age. Also, you could never be sure that what he said was necessarily a statement of what he believed.

Mike Strong pulled a hand across his eyes. "Please! Don't push me onto a merry-go-round. Right now I've got to stick to basics."

"Have you got any to stick to?"

"That's why I came running like a whipped pup to you. I need some."

"I can only give you one: There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio—"

"Great!" Mike muttered. "So I just sit around and come apart."

"They could put you in an asylum," Paul Bender mused.

"Would you sign the papers?"

"No. Documents of that sort should be signed by people with something to gain—relatives who can get their hands on the nut's money. Would you like to sign your fortune over to me?"

"I haven't any."

"Hmmm. Improvident and wasteful. A black mark."

"Paul! Will you please take this thing seriously?"

"I am, but let's not tense up over it."

Mike's brow was wrinkled in heavy thought. "What I can't reconcile is the time element."

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"What about it?"

"On that other plane, I got home from wherever I worked about six o'clock. I confronted Solonoff around seven-thirty. But when I came back to this plane it was only five—or fifteen minutes after I'd dismissed my class."

"That shouldn't bother you. Why should time on that plane obey the laws of this one?"

Mike sighed. "We seem to be taking it for granted that I *was* on another plane."

"We've got to have terms of reference and that's as good a one as any. But tell me this—what do you have against leading two lives? They're both active, interesting existences. Why not just consider yourself lucky and wait to see what happens?"

"Good God! Do you want me to crack up?"

"The two lives don't seem to interfere with each other."

"But it's contrary to all sanity!"

"Mikel Stop talking like a child. The word sanity is nothing more than another term of reference. The world's most brilliant people may be locked in asylums for all we know. Right now, your problem is the fear of something that exists only in human judgments. I repeat—you may be the most fortunate of men."

"I'll sign all my good fortune over to you when the gates close on me," Mike said.

Paul relit his nauseous pipe and allowed a little sympathy to show through. "Let's dig a little deeper," he said. "You aren't reacting to a single, phenomenal incident. There's more to this. You were running scared when this one happened."

"There have been a few others," Mike said guardedly.

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"Well, don't go coy on me all of a sudden. Tell me about them."

"One happened years ago—when I was a high school student. I found myself in a very cold place among primitive people. I was one of them. It could have been Outer Mongolia or even Siberia. I lived in a village with my parents and I had a shaggy little pony of which I was very fond. It was a blustery, bitterly cold day and we were all excited because a great man was going to visit us—a holy man."

"What was your religion?"

"We were Buddhists, I think. I remember standing outside our hut for hours, afraid I would miss the man. Then I came and I was the only one there. He was incredibly old but he wore only a light robe. Still, he did not seem to be in the least uncomfortable. He got off his horse and put his hand on my head. He asked me where the others were and I said I would get them. But he shook his head and spoke cryptically. 'Let the virgins sleep,' he said. 'You alone have waited.' He continued to look into my eyes and I remember that I was tremendously uplifted. Then he said, 'Your life here is but a moment, my son. You will go many places and see many things.' Then he got back on his horse and left."

"Who was he? You should remember whom you were expecting. It was part of the phenomenon."

"A holy man. From India, I think."

Paul Bender pondered that. "I don't know what an Indian mystic would be doing in Outer Mongolia—or why he would have been speaking in Christian parables. Did that incident frighten you?"

"Not to any great extent. I put it down as a dream."

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"Perhaps you had more faith in those days. You said there were others."

"Once when I was in my mid-twenties—about seven years ago—I was riding a jet to San Francisco. I was rushing to my mother's death bed. When the plane put down, a limousine was waiting for me. The family chauffeur drove me to where my family lived—in Oakland. It was a beautiful mansion. I'd spent my childhood there. I rushed inside and upstairs and I was too late. My mother had died half an hour earlier."

"Tragic," Paul Bender commented.

"I never saw her. After that one, I wasn't so much frightened as saddened. I wondered what my mother had looked like; if she in any way resembled my true mother."

"Is your mother dead? Your true mother?"

"She died when I was twelve years old."

Bender waved the stem of his pipe toward the liquor cabinet. "Your glass is empty." While Mike refilled it, Bender said, "It appears that none of these incidents hinges in any way upon the others."

"I could have lived in San Francisco and still married an actress named Vera Spain."

"What was your name in San Francisco?"

"I don't know—nor in any of the other incidents. My name was never spoken. I suppose I knew it at the time. But I can't remember now."

"You could hardly have done any backtracking in Outer Mongolia, but San Francisco was different. Did you do any checking to see if—?"

"I was living in New York City at the time and funds were a little short. But the next year I made a trip West. I went to San Francisco—to the airport—and tried to retrace the route in a cab. I wasn't very successful. I

landed in a decent enough neighborhood, but there were no estates, no mansions. I had to give up."

"All right," Paul Bender said. "Your first incident was long ago. Over seven years have elapsed since the last one. That would put the next one years into the future. So why are you so upset about this one?"

"A feeling I have. I'm sure they will come thicker and faster now. It's as though—well, as though something has finally slipped. I—this one scares me, Paul."

Paul Bender studied his friend keenly. "You're afraid you're going out of your mind, is that it?"

"It panics me to think I may be losing control over myself. I'm afraid of what might happen."

"You should be able to control your fears. You're a mature, educated man. And I take it there's no history of insanity in your family."

"None whatever."

"Then if I were you, I wouldn't look upon myself as either a freak or a person out of step with the rest of the world. Just keep your affairs to yourself and *see* what happens."

"Do you think they are just hallucinations of some kind?"

"I haven't the least idea. But look at it this way. Perhaps what's happening to you happens to everyone. Maybe you're just a rare specimen with the ability to carry memories of other lives back and forth with you."

"That's beyond all concept of—"

"What's the difference?" Paul Bender snorted. "We're nothing more than countless miniscules of awareness—sparks flashing off some vast conscious reality we know nothing about. We're under the absolute control of awareness and unawareness. We walk between them as though they were two great walls. And they both terri-

fy us for opposite reasons. We fear one because we know it and the other because we don't know it. Our name for God is Mystery."

"You've never indicated much of a religious leaning," Mike said slowly.

"Nevertheless, I'm deeply religious. We're all parts of a great and infinite Force and that Power knows what it's doing. So why don't you have another drink and stop wasting time by being afraid of God?"

The scotch had had a mellowing effect and Mike was beginning to appreciate Paul Bender's wisdom although he couldn't quite put his finger upon anything of great value that Bender had imparted. But at least Bender appeared to understand and that was a comfort.

"Have you told Donna any of this?" Bender asked.

"Good lord, no. She'd put her guard up every time I came around."

"You don't seem to have much faith in her."

"She's a beautiful girl. She's popular. She doesn't have to waste her time on kooks."

"Also, you don't seem to have much faith in yourself."

Paul Bender was putting an edge on Mike's temper. "For God's sake, quit bugging me!"

"You could do with a little prodding at times. I've noticed a distinct inversion in you. And being a bully at heart, I enjoy it."

Mike was scowling at his empty glass. "What if these phenomena increase? Suppose they begin to have longer duration? Then the time might come when I can't return."

"In that case," Paul Bender said, "let me wish you success in finding a pleasant existence."

Mike raised his eyes to study his friend. "Nothing I

told you seemed to surprise you in the least. Have you had previous experience with this sort of thing?"

"I've met men who claimed the ability to go from one plane to another at will. But I never necessarily believed they could do it. In fact I've never had any definite proof that any inhabitable planes other than this one actually exist. That puts you at an advantage. You do have proof."

"Suppose this had happened to you?"

"I'd consider myself most fortunate. And I'd probably give up this Chair and spend all my time traveling from one plane to the other."

"I guess you would," Mike sighed.

"To me, it all sounds incredibly fascinating. So as a friend I beg of you—please keep me informed."

Mike left the house at the end of Faculty Row, not quite sure whether he had been wise in confiding his problem to Paul Bender or not. He was sure of one thing, though. Bender would respect the confidence.

He was plagued by the feeling that Paul Bender had held much in reserve. Had Bender really believed him? As he'd talked he'd sensed the wheels turning in Bender's mind and was sure Bender had been making mental references to which he'd given no voice. Nor had much sympathy been extended.

Perhaps it *had* all been a fantastically clear daydream. Maybe Bender had been really pitying him for his childish apprehension.

More disturbed than ever, Mike took his eyes from his pocket. As he pushed the door key toward its slot in the lock, he stopped and held his hand motionless for a long moment. Then he slowly raised it and stared at his knuckles. They were bruised. He flexed his fingers into a fist. There was a swelling.

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He had practically convinced himself that the lapse had been entirely mental. Now that hope was suddenly dashed.

As he opened the door, the fears came back—with a new one added. He hadn't seen Solonoff move after going to the floor.

Was Mike Strong, among other fantastic things, a murderer also . . . ?

3

MIKE got home just as the phone rang. He picked it up. A guarded voice said, "I got it."

Mike was surprised. He hadn't expected the operation to go so smoothly. "Okay. What's holding you up?"

"I called. You weren't home. I didn't want to stand around in front of your place with no satchel in my mitt."

"I'm home now," Mike snapped, and broke the connection.

He scowled at the phone for a moment and then went out on the patio and scowled at the vast city spread out before him. From thirty floors up, the people looked like tiny dolls moving along the streets.

The view from his patio was always a source of satisfaction to Mike. It was symbolical of his rise. "A floor at a time—the hard way," he'd told Lorry the first time

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she'd looked down from his luxurious suite. "Up here with the eagles, kid."

Lorry had been properly adoring and Mike liked that. She'd been another of his conquests. Well, not a conquest exactly. She'd tipped over into his arms like a wobbly ten pin. Lorry was the crowning luxury that went with his position and his success.

But at the moment, he wasn't thinking about Lorry. He was filled with the tension and the excitement of the things of the moment—the deal. Two hundred thousand dollars was a lot of money to move safely. It was Mike's job to take it in and see that various shares got into the right hands.

For all his confident image and the sure, smooth manner in which he worked, Mike ran scared in the maneuvers. He was noted in his circle for the complex arrangements he could create and execute. The secret of success as a fixer was to complicate the payoffs to a point where "all the snoopers ever smack into is a lot of brick walls."

That had been the compliment accorded him from higher up. Nobody worried when he was handling grease job.

But he never let down; never got cocky; never became contemptuous of the jerks who would make such headlines as:

\$200,000 GRAFT UNCOVERED IN MUNICIPAL CONSTRUCTION

Or:

BRIBE SUSPECTS INDICTED BY BLUE RIBBON GRAND JURY

One fumble like that and a man was through in this touchy game.

Over a scotch and a quiet cigarette, Mike reviewed

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the devious sequences through which he'd nursed this one. Then he went to the phone and dialed a number. A female voice answered.

"Tell Frank his car's been oiled and greased."

The voice was cool and showed no surprise. "Fine. When can we pick it up?"

"Right away if you want it. Who's coming?"

"I am," the cool voice stated.

"You?"

"Why not? I drive very well."

"I'll have it outside waiting," Mike said, and there was a faint uneasiness in his tone.

"That won't be necessary. I'll come straight to the garage."

"I could have it delivered."

"What's the matter?" the voice mocked. "Is the garage crowded?"

"It's empty."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

As he put the phone down, the door bell burped discreetly and when he opened it an inoffensive little man who might have been an underpaid bookkeeper pushed a canvas airline zipper bag at him. He took the bag and closed the door.

After bolting the door, he unzipped the bag and found everything all right. The bag contained green money banded into \$5,000 bundles. He counted the bundles and found them correct.

But as he worked, the annoyance generated by the phone call increased. Big Frank had become a danger because he had woman trouble and of all the diseases that could land you behind bars, none was more dangerous than that. He was gone on Fay to a point where he'd let her in on his affairs.

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Care in selecting women was one of his own first rules. Lorry was beautiful, luscious, in every way satisfactory as a female. But, and this above all, monumentally stupid:

"Darling! How did you make the money that made all this possible?"

"I inherited some money from my father and I was lucky. I now own a small investment business."

And he was covered, too; a modest office in the financial district—*Intercontinental Investments*—that so far as legality was concerned, passed all tests.

But Big Frank was stupid, with the situation made doubly dangerous by Fay's predatory instincts. Lorry was a challenge to Fay. This put him in a potentially dangerous position with Big Frank. If Fay ever hinted at a non-existent affair between them, Big Frank would have him crippled some dark night.

What angered him was the crudity of the thing. Pure cornball. But then, in this racket, you dealt with cornball people; elemental; the types long on emotion and muscle and short on judgment and brains.

He glanced at his watch after dividing the money, and made another phone call. A man answered this time:

"Barney's Pet Shop."

"I'd like to get my French poodle clipped."

"Sorry. We're all booked up for the rest of the week."

"But he needs attention. He crawled under a car and got all greasy."

"Oh. Well, I guess we can take care of him."

"Can you pick him up?"

"Sure. When?"

"I'll have him ready in an hour."

"We'll be there."

"Who'll come?"

"He'll have a uniform on."

"Okay."

He broke the connection and went to the closet with the false wall behind which there were various types of containers. He selected a hat box with a French name on it and put a silly-looking hat into it. He took out the box and also a small animal carrier and took them into the living room. There, he stacked packets of money under the false bottoms of both containers and then put them back behind the wall in the closet. Both containers would be moved out shortly, so putting them back into their place of concealment may have seemed overcautious. But he believed in being overcautious. It would be stupid to have arranged things wisely and then get raided with the loot lying out in plain sight.

The money that would stay with him went into the closet also and then the bell signaled and he went to the door to admit Fay.

Maybe she did have it on Lorry; at least a little; nothing in the purely physical; nobody could beat Lorry there. But Fay had more spirit. A totally submissive woman could bore you at times, but Fay was different. She would always keep a man guessing. She didn't do that with Big Frank of course because he didn't appreciate the subtle aspect of things and all it would have gotten her would have been a bat in the mouth. But Fay handled herself pretty well when he wasn't around.

She knew clothes, too. At the moment, she wore a thing with a full skirt that added to her already perfect legs, and a leopard skin top that added something up there too.

As he closed the door, she peered expectantly about.
"Where is she? In bed?"

"Cut it out. I told you I was alone."

"When she's here, darling, you're still alone."

"I'll get your package."

"Take it easy, dearest. Let's not overlook the amenities. I've got a few minutes between cabs."

"Aren't you due at the theater?"

"If I don't make it, they'll hold the curtain."

They would too, even though Fay's part consisted of a walk-on and four lines in the first act. This consideration attested to the fact that Big Frank's money kept the show from closing. It was a dog.

"Would you like a drink?"

"I was wondering how soon you'd ask."

He made two scotches and brought one to Fay where she'd arranged herself on the lounge so that quite a little thigh was exposed. It did not move him. He had seen thighs before. He could take it or leave it alone.

Sure of her power over men, Fay accepted the glass and studied him with faint mockery in her eyes. "You have a nice place here, but you could do a lot better—you really could."

"I'm doing fine."

"Has Lorry helped you any?"

"She isn't supposed to."

"That's where you're wrong, darling. You could have all that and additional advantages also. I've helped Frank a great deal."

"Maybe you'll help him into jail some day."

Her eyes stopped being soft. They flared. "You've got a lot of a nerve, saying that."

"A man should run his own business."

"When he's got a dumb broad on his hands, he has

to," Fay sneered. "I'll bet you wouldn't dare send Lorry across the street for a pack of cigarettes."

"Why are you always sniping at her? I'm satisfied. Why not leave it alone?"

"Are you begging, darling?"

"No, I'm just asking."

"Because I have your interests at heart." She paused and when he didn't answer, added, "I could make Frank take a bigger interest in you, too."

"You're out of your skull. You know that if Frank got the idea you were even looking around, he'd separate you from your head."

She got up and crossed over and sat down on the arm of his chair. "But he wouldn't have to know, sweetie. I've got Frankie right in my handbag."

"Like the black eye you were wearing for over a month last year?"

Fay snarled like a beautiful cat, showing teeth just as white and sharp. "You've got a big mouth, buster. All I'd have to do would be to—"

"I know—go home and tell him I made a pass. Then I'd have to start watching out for his boys."

"I was wondering if you had sense enough to realize that."

"Look, angel. I'm not quite as helpless as you think. And I'm not as scared of Big Frank as you'd like to believe. I just don't want trouble for no reason. So why don't you take your hat box and be on your way?"

Fay pursed her beautiful lips—thus making them very kissable—and retreated gracefully. That was what it was about her—you could never tell whether you'd get a fistful of snails in your face or a warm purr.

"Frank said for you to call him, darling," she said.

Their war was over for the moment. She finished her

drink and took the hat box and threw him a kiss as she left.

Alone, he again checked his watch. There would be time to call Big Frank.

As he waited for the connection, he had a touch of uneasiness; not about Fay. She wasn't ready to make any sort of move; about Big Frank himself. He had a bluff, crude, uneducated approach to things. But that didn't mean he wasn't clever. His record spoke for him; definitely the man to see; twenty-six arrests with only one conviction and that set aside.

The phone buzzed twice at the private number before Big Frank's voice came back.

"Dion's Flower Shop."

This was a manifestation of Big Frank's broad sense of humor. Long ago, in the wild Chicago days, there had been a flower shop owned by a man whose first name had been Dion. One day two gunmen had walked in. One held the owner's hand in a grip of goodfellowship while the other fanned him down with a bouquet of slugs from an automatic. Big Frank seemed to like the historical attachment in the name.

"I said, Dion's—"

"The car was just picked up."

"Oh, it's you. I know. It just got here."

"I was supposed to call."

"Oh, yeah. I got wind on something. An injustice. I thought about you."

"Why me?"

"I'd hate to see you have to walk up thirty floors to get home nights."

It sounded silly—like a lot of double talk. But then, what with bugs and things, it always did. You had to listen between the words.

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"That would be rough."

"It sure would—on you and a lot of other joes that live up high."

"An elevator strike?"

"Uh-huh. All that hardship and stuff."

"Anything I can do?"

"Might be. First, have a talk with Sid Garms at the Real Estate Association. That ought to do some good. Then drop in on Bailey at the Union. Tell both of 'em I sent you. Maybe you can get it stopped."

"Okay."

"And by the way, I'm putting my house up for sale."

"How much?"

"Fifty grand."

"Steep price."

"It's worth it."

"If the buyer thinks so."

"The buyer will . . ."

He broke the connection. The buyer would be the Real Estate Board. They'd pay fifty grand out of their public relations budget to keep their elevators repaired and running without handing anything more to the slobs who did the work—the union rank and file.

So it was another job for a good in-between man; a fixer. He would contact the principals in this deal, tie them together with an invisible thread of skill and finesse and when it was over, no one would be able to prove that anything had happened.

He should have received the news with a glow of satisfaction. But he did not. He went out onto the patio again and stared down at the ants. They were still crawling around with satisfactory aimlessness. They were still ripe for many, many lootings.

But he was uneasy. It seemed that there was something

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he was supposed to remember. But for the life of him, he couldn't pull it into his mind.

The bell sounded. That would be a uniformed messenger after the French poodle. Still frowning, he went to the door.

But it wasn't a messenger. It was three men in blue suits. One of them waved a paper.

"Search warrant. Stand aside. We're checking over these premises."

They pushed in and fanned out like experts. He tightened up inside as he watched in silence. He moved back just inside the living room. Two of the men, iron-faced, stood alert while one of them headed straight for the bedroom. The closet door opened.

Suddenly, it dawned. This wasn't law. This was somebody's muscle! A key rattled in the lock. The door opened and Lorry stood there. Her eyes went wide in fright and surprise. One of the men slipped a gun from where he'd been gripping it in his side pocket.

The drawer of the desk opened silently and easily. The butt of the automatic lying there was cool and reassuring.

This was the first time he'd ever been invaded, so there was no previous experience to guide him. Thus, his action was foolish. He realized this, but too late; after the automatic had gone off and the blue-suited man holding the other gun had doubled over and gone to his knees.

The other man stared at his fallen companion and then looked accusingly at the offending automatic. As he raised his eyes, his companion joined him from the bedroom.

"You stupid son-of-a-bitch," the man muttered.

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Lorry was screaming.

The man on the floor jerked in pain.

Then the scene did not fade. It just wasn't there anymore . . .

4

"MIKE! *Will* you wake up?"

He had been vaguely conscious for what had seemed like a long time but it had probably been only a few seconds. He opened his eyes and saw Donna bending over him.

"Oh—oh, sure," he mumbled. "Must have dropped off."

"You certainly did drop off. I phoned twice and when you didn't answer, I came over. The door was unlocked. Then I saw you there—I was frightened."

Her concern warmed him and he smiled as he took her hand and drew her down on the lounge. She was prettier than Lorry but that was all he could say. He had seen Lorry only once, fleetingly there in the doorway before he shot the hood. And he knew Donna was clearly more beautiful. But then, he conceded with all

honesty, he might have been prejudiced. He knew Donna better.

"I just dropped down for a few winks before I called you, honey. Guess I was more tired than I thought."

That didn't clear the matter up for Donna. She continued to frown. "But there's something wrong, isn't there Mike?"

"No, not a thing, honestly."

She got up and turned away from him and walked to the window. She spoke abruptly. "Who is Lorry?"

"Lorry?"

"Yes. Before you were fully awake, you seized my hand and whispered, 'Lorry! Please don't leave me. I love you, Lorry!'"

"Oh, you just misunderstood me. I said Donna, of course."

"No, you said Lorry."

He could only grin and try to make light of it. "Maybe it's my dream name for you, sweetheart."

"Then there isn't anyone else?"

"Of course not!"

No one else except Vera, his wife; Lorry, his girl friend, and only heaven knew how many others. But there seemed no point in further confusing the issue by mentioning them.

He pulled her down and kissed the rest of the doubt from her lips and then said, "Tell you what—I'll take the prettiest girl in town out to dinner."

"I'd love it, but I just can't tonight. I'm working on a paper that must be in tomorrow morning. I need at least five more hours. Besides, you took me out to dinner last night."

Donna was doing postgraduate work. She'd spent three years traveling after her graduation and was now

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back, doing added work in paleontology. Thus, her status made their relationship permissible at the college.

Mike struggled up to a sitting position. "Then we'll have a drink before you go back."

"Please—no. I hate to be a wet blanket, but it would put fuzz on my brain."

"Guess I'm a lousy salesman," he smiled.

Donna sobered and dropped down beside him. "Mike," she asked, "do I disappoint you?"

"Why, darling! In what way could you possibly—?"

"Am I too narrow and strait-laced?"

"Good lord! What's been going on in that weird little mind of yours."

"*Little* mind. I think you've hit it. Narrow mind."

"That's crazy."

"Mike, I'm no fool. I know how things are today. These are modern times. When a man has a girl friend he expects something from her."

"Donna! Will you stop acting childish!"

She turned to bury her face in his shoulder. "I guess I have got ideas about marriage. But I still don't want to lose you." She realized it was getting awfully heavy and she tried to lighten it with a rueful smile. "Especially to any girl named Lorry. She sounds flip—superficial."

Normally, he would have had the patience to cajole her out of her mood, but at the moment he was in a mood himself. He was tense and on edge.

"Donna. Once and for all, there's no Lorry. And I'm not going to demand a payoff for a few dinners. Does that make you feel better?"

"It makes me feel worse," she wailed.

Good God! How stupid could females get? Here he was tangled in a nightmare where his very sanity was at

stake and Donna was going childish on him. "You're impossible. I'm leaving!"

She left, and Mike sat staring bleakly at the wall, wondering what he'd done to be completely deserted by kindly destiny. Then he got up and poured himself a generous double scotch and drank it neat. The flame that clawed at his throat was reality indeed and when the liquor hit his stomach it lay there like a soothing hand and quieted his doubts and fears.

Snap out of it, he told himself. What would your students think of you? You're an important cog in the academic machine. They're supposed to look up to you and admire you. The timid ones should even stand in awe of you. Please make some slight effort to live up to that image.

That helped some, so he went on. You're adult, intelligent, and self-sufficient. You don't need to lean on anyone.

But that didn't work so well. It reminded him that Paul Bender had lent a sympathetic ear, and he went to the phone and dialed Bender and said, "It happened again—and worse this time."

"Hmmm. Why don't you drop over and tell me about it?"

"I'll be there in ten minutes . . ."

Paul Bender's keen blue eyes cut into Mike's face—joyfully, Mike thought; with such an obvious zest that Mike was irked.

"We seem to have the fact," Bender said. "Now we must use it to support the theory that seems most applicable."

"I'm well aware of logical thought processes," Mike said. "I teach logic if you'll recall."

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"Then you'll have no trouble going along with me. I've done some work with the idea that living entities have more to do with their futures, their life patterns, than most philosophers will concede."

Mike saw nothing there to debate and remained silent.

"Now what's to stop us from broadening that concept? Our awareness of course is the key to everything, but why should we necessarily be limited to one awareness?"

"Because each of us is only one person."

"It would appear so, but haven't you had at least an indication that you possess a multiple awareness—other parts of it functioning, living, being, on other planes of human existence?"

"But we already have ample proof that this one, the one you and I are in right now, is the only material plane in existence."

"Then you concede that what you went through were dreams."

"I concede no such thing!"

"Well, make up your mind. You can't have both the material and the immaterial in the same concept."

"Everything I ever learned and believed fights the idea of myriad worlds. But both the places I was in were as real as this place, believe me!"

"Another point we can accept, I think, is this: Multiple lives are not unique to you as an individual. They are true of all people."

"Well, something's unique to me and to me only. Other people aren't—"

"You're unique in recall. You've joined a select group—that of those not trapped in each separate consciousness by an obvious splintering process."

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"That's ridiculous. If John Smith is living one life on this plane and another on some other plane, then John Smith is two people, or ten, or a dozen, as the case may be."

"But wasn't Michael Strong the same person on all three planes? Can't you testify to that?"

"I don't know whether I can or not." Mike lifted his fist and stared at it. The knuckles were still bruised.

"Let's check the three examples we have and see if we can find similarities."

"In the other two, I'm wealthy. In this one, I'm not. That would seem to knock the similarity idea."

"Not necessarily. They certainly wouldn't be identical. But in the other two, you're involved with actresses. In the first life, your wife, Vera is an actress. In the second, Big Frank's girl friend is also on the stage."

"In both cases their careers are supported by money from the men in their lives. I angelay Vera's show. And Big Frank is keeping Fay's show going."

"I notice you're using the present tense."

"Does that indicate something?"

"Possibly not. But it may indicate acceptance of those other lives as realities. If you were thinking in terms of dreams you would have used the past tense."

"Where does that get us?"

"It was merely an observation. And by the way, we've overlooked the first two lives—the earlier ones where the holy man visited you and when your mother died."

"Are you able to tie in the Outer Mongolian setting by any stretch of imagination?"

"We don't seem to have gotten very far in tying any of them together. But one thing occurs to me—they may be incomplete lives."

"What do you mean?"

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"Suppose there are crux points in our original life—in this one—where we have difficulty in facing the realities here and form—subconsciously or otherwise—a different existence where troubles in this one are avoided or mistakes we've made here are rectified? At these times, when forces we aren't aware of come into play, these other lives might come into being."

"I'd hate to try borrowing money on that one at a bank," Mike said wearily.

Paul Bender ignored this. "That would make the other lives incomplete. The Mike Strongs on those planes would originate at the moment of the splinter operation."

"What if one of those Mike Strongs is killed? Would that finish me here?"

"No reason why it should. You existed here before those lives began. You could still exist after they ended."

"But when I went to San Francisco it was to bury my mother. Didn't that indicate a past, an origination in that life?"

"It may have been an illusion."

"Sitting here drinking your scotch, I can clearly recall my mother and father on this plane—where I was born—where I lived as a child. Is that an illusion?"

"Could you recall that in the other lives?"

"I don't know. I can't remember. In those lives I was concentrating on things of the moment, not thinking over old times. I have to assume that I could have remembered anything necessary."

"One other point suggests this as being the basic life."

"What's that?"

"You can remember others after coming back to this one. But when you're there, you can't recall ever having been any place else."

Mike sprang to his feet and began pacing the floor.

"All this chit chat is great. I'd enjoy it immensely if it were an abstract discussion concerning someone else. But I'm the subject of this debate. And all I'm really interested in is how I can get out of it—make it stop."

"I wouldn't think you'd want to. You've had X number of lives suddenly opened to you. What could be more exciting?"

"I don't want excitement. I'll take my pipe and slippers and retire gracefully into old age."

"We may be able to accomplish that. But tell me this—has anything exceptional happened during your psychiatric sessions? Maybe they were what triggered this thing."

Mike gave the possibility reasonable thought and shook his head. "I think not."

"Why did you go to a psychiatrist?"

"Not to be cured of anything. My mental health didn't worry me. But I'd gotten quite restless, bored with things, uncertain as to what to do. I wanted a sounding board to bounce ideas off of and get reactions."

"Why didn't you come to me?"

"Because it was all so vague. I wouldn't have known where to begin with you."

"We need more data," Paul Bender said decisively.

"We haven't enough to go on."

"One thing occurs to me," Mike said.

"Well, don't keep it a secret."

"When I was in that last life, something was bothering me. I was nervous and uneasy. I felt that there was something I was supposed to remember. I associated the lapse with that life, naturally. But I think now that I was close to recalling this life without the ability to quite get through. Before that transition I told myself I would make a point of remembering more the next

time in order to clarify things when I got back here again. I think that's what was bothering me."

"Which would tend to prove that you were the same person there as here."

"I suppose so. But what really bothers me is when this business gets around. I'll be the freak of the campus."

"You're not broadcasting it, are you?"

"Of course not. But I don't think I function on two planes at once. The last transition took place while I was asleep at home. Donna woke me up and asked who Lorry was. I'd mentioned the name several times while Donna was waking me up."

"Did you admit to knowing a Lorry?"

"I brushed it off. But what if a transition comes when I'm with somebody—lecturing my class? So far, I've been alone each time, but what will happen when I'm not?"

"You need an observer."

"That's what scares me. Twenty-eight observers in my logic class rushing out to tell the world I went into a trance for an hour during class."

"I don't think the time sequences coincide at all. I think an afternoon in some other life might be an instant or less in this one."

"It's a comforting thought. But I'll feel better when I'm certain of it."

"Don't worry, Mike," Paul Bender said cheerfully. "You've got a great many futures ahead of you. And how many men can say as much?"

"That's one of your endearing qualities, Paul," Mike said bleakly. "You find good in everything . . ."

5

MIKE STRONG came back to the group and said, "They've barricaded the town. We'll have to go around it."

There were some fifty of them, several groups that had merged against the common danger of an uncertain future; women and children mostly, with a small scattering of men; a merging with each of the groups holding more or less to its own identity.

Mike was with a group of seven, three women and three children. Two of the children belonged to Sarah Turner—Barbara, six years old, and Johnny, nine. The other small one was the baby Jeanne Barns carried in her arms. Greta Rood, a big, motherly Scandanavian blonde, was unencumbered. Her whole family had been killed in the first instant of the holocaust.

Why Mike had attached himself to this group and given it his loyalty and protection, he didn't quite know. In fact, he'd sought no reason. It had just happened

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that way after the sudden change in the scheme of things wherein reasons for anything became no longer important. After that single hour—more brutal than the world had ever known—most of civilization's hard-won gains had been stripped away and only one word was important.

Survival. Nothing else mattered.

Back to the ways of the ant.

That idea had formed like a backdrop in Mike Strong's mind; like a foundation upon which all else was now based; people moving by instinct, guided only, it seemed, by the deep urgings of mass consciousness.

Mike had gone on ahead with several of the other men to scout the situation. Now they'd returned and each of them went to his own segment to report. Unconsciously, Mike directed his words to Greta Rood as the second dominating personality in the group.

"Barricaded," he said. "They're manning the circle-armed men. We were directed to move on."

"But we need food and rest. Will they give us supplies?"

"They say they have only enough for themselves."

Barbara Turner began to whimper. "I'm hungry, Mommy."

The harassed mother drew her daughter close and stroked her matted hair. "Just a little longer, honey. Everything will be all right."

Mike Strong's jaws tensed at the necessity of telling comforting lies to children. Yet, it was interesting and somewhat inspiring to see that the children took things with more aplomb than their elders. There had been hysterics and crackups among the adults; women screaming and collapsing under pressures too great to

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bear; men going suddenly berserk from rages they could no longer contain.

But the children were like rubber. They were dented but they were never bent. The material they were made of, not yet hardened by growth, gave like trees in the wind and straightened from each individual gust. Nearby, a trio of tots laughed as they crawled in and out of a small crater, making a game of stark disaster, waiting for their parents to master ever-gushing fears and move on.

Johnny Turner listened, tense and bright-eyed to Mike's report. "Maybe after dark I could sneak in and swipe some milk or something."

Greta pulled him close in a warm gesture. "Just you be quiet, young man. You'll do nothing foolhardy." She turned her attention back to Mike. "What do the other men think?"

"That we should move on. Those villagers are scared. They're in an ugly mood."

"If we approached them—took the children with us—showed them our plight."

"They know our plight and it might be dangerous. A frightened man does not like to be shamed. They sympathize with us, but they have their own to think about."

Faces turned upward as a pair of jets streaked across the sky. In the beginning, they had been smoky plumes of hope. But that had changed because they had brought no help. Now, they were little more than symbols of frustrations bringing angry shouts and curses. They only proved that somewhere in the country things had held together and the nation was functioning. Here, in the upper eastern and north central areas of the coun-

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try there was only destruction, disorder, and leaderless chaos.

No one had really expected it because it was too unthinkable. The top world powers would work things out. They weren't fools. They had more sense than to commit world suicide. Even in that tensest of moments with the Russian missiles pointing at our heart from Cuba, the people, though frightened, were sure things would work out. Russia would back down.

But something slipped. We had underestimated Russia's nuclear capabilities; of this, Mike was sure. At least, the people had not been told.

Then, the incredible warning. Atomic warheads coming over the Pole; doubted even then. A test; the sirens merely howling a dry run. The touch of panic in the warnings because even announcers are human: "Our interceptors are aloft. The threat will be met and destroyed over northern Canada . . ."

That was the announcement Mike had heard on the highway driving home from lower Pennsylvania. Then everything went dead but the official channels.

Chicago was dead too; Chicago, Detroit, the whole lower-Lake Michigan industrial complex. That was where the foe had struck first. The great American railroad knocked out.

From where Mike sat behind the wheel of his car, you could accept the announcement as fact or reject it as a rumor. He did neither. His mind was on New York City and an apartment in the east eighties; on Marge and Ginny and Lee.

They won't hit New York City. The UN is there. They won't antagonize the whole world by killing delegates from every nation. They won't kill their own people.

The smoke and orange flame that lit the far horizon

ahead said otherwise. The announcer babbled. "New York City . . . Washington . . . We are retaliating . . ."

Mike quietly pulled his car onto the shoulder of the road and laughed. His laughter was a strange sound coming out of lips only slightly open; from a face set in a rigid emptiness of expression.

Retaliation. The awesome might of the greatest nation the earth had ever known unleashed in a rage of counterattack. Moscow would be gone by now. The Polaris subs would have spouted their death. SAC would have rained its destruction down from above. Russia would even now be dying.

But it didn't matter. That was the thought that hit Mike. It didn't matter. All that might had been formed and gathered to prevent world destruction, not to help it along. It had not prevented the unthinkable. Therefore whatever its uses after it failed in its only important job didn't matter.

All in all, it took Mike half an hour to accept the new scheme of things—the world as it now was. During that time he sat in his car on the shoulder of the road and watched the passing scene. Cars rocketed by at top speeds. One driver lost control and veered away as he came abreast of Mike. His car shot off the highway, landed on its nose and went end-over-end twice. Mike watched, still expressionless as it burst into flame. He was mildly interested in whether the driver would escape. When no one emerged from the wreck, he turned his flat, empty eyes elsewhere. Some cars stopped, their occupants leaping out to run in panic across the surrounding open country.

Mike watched with total disattachment as thoughts shaped and registered on his awareness.

I'm changed. I was a man with a wife and two daugh-

ters. I sold boy's clothing to make a living for them. That's what I was twenty minutes ago. Now I have no wife and no children and no job and no plans. All that no longer exists. Now I'm a purposeless creature going nowhere.

It was a strange feeling.

He started his car and thought of turning around and going in the obviously safer direction. But he did not. He cut back onto the road and drove on toward the hideous, smoky horizon that held nothing for him. He was moving against traffic and had to watch for drivers who had swung over into the empty lanes for clearer leeway. The highway was really a one-way road now but the heavy traffic had not as yet had time to gather.

Two miles up the road, he stopped for a strange conversation with a woman who hailed him. She had red, beautifully coiffured hair and was not more than twenty-five. She wore skin-tight blue stretch pants and sandals with great wedge soles and straw bands across the insteps. A bandanna-type bra revealed rather than concealed her breasts and Mike noted that she had an exceptionally deep, well-formed navel.

"You're going the wrong way," she said in a pleasant, dazed voice. "It's cowardly."

"Cowardly?" Mike was interested. He'd thought of neither cowardice nor bravery.

"Yes. You'll be needed down there." The girl waved her arm in a general southerly direction. "There's nothing back there. Down there is where you'll be needed."

It was a thought and Mike considered it soberly.

The woman smiled and said, "We're getting all the people together that we can to go down and help."

"Who is getting them together?"

"Why—we are."

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There was a strange automation tone to her voice and an even stranger brightness in her eyes and Mike knew all about her except where she had come from to appear at that point on the highway.

She was upper middle class; a good, well-ordered home somewhere; a rising husband; children. She was PTA and Red Cross and Junior League and country club charity drive and in her stunned horror at the new scheme of things she was going through the motions one always went through at her level. One helped. She organized. One made one's decision and functioned.

Most interesting, Mike thought. He moved on north wondering where the girl had come from and how soon she would explode into screaming hysteria. It didn't really matter, though.

He drove on and after a while the traffic got too thick to buck so he pulled off the road. And, as had the deep-naveled girl, he also went through conditioned gestures. He rolled his windows up and carefully locked his car and then began walking north.

Six days had now elapsed since that hour of sudden world change. Now, Mike was somewhere in eastern Ohio, moving west. He'd made the trip on foot except for a short ride in a truck when no one objected to his crawling in. He'd passed many people and groups of people without attaching himself to any of them. He'd moved along as a spectator, participating in the scene but functioning more as an observer.

There had been two sandwiches in the car and a box of cookies and he'd brought the food with him. But he'd eaten sparingly and was surprised at how little food he needed to keep him going comfortably. He had drunk water where he could find it giving no thought to whether it was poisoned or not.

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This also was a thing he noticed; the disregard of people for the dangerous conditions that now existed. Where there was water, they made no inquiry as to its condition. They drank it and gave it to their children to drink. Where there was food, they crammed it into their mouths.

During his whole pilgrimage, he heard no mention whatever of fallout, fatal radiation, or contamination of the air. People breathed the air because it was all there was to breathe and saved their complaints for other hardships.

He saw evidences of the lethal atmosphere however; the weak dropping by the wayside; some left alone; others receiving what comfort relatives and friends could give.

This proved a simple point. Only the strong would survive.

One plaint was repeated over and over: *Where is the government? Why doesn't somebody in the government do something?*

Mike didn't know. And so long as nothing *was* being done, it didn't seem important. Things, it appeared, had been reduced to the simplest elementals.

It was or it wasn't.

It did or it didn't.

Causes were no longer important. Anything other than the elementals was now mere wishful thinking. You concentrated upon surviving through this hour. The next one would take care of itself.

Something in the orderly structure had broken down. That was sure. The System was not functioning. For whatever reason, the people among whom Mike walked had been left to shift for themselves.

There were a few battery radios functioning and

these were prized possessions indeed. The owners became seers to be consulted and petitioned concerning what the future held. But Mike heard few facts first hand. What came to his ears was mostly rumor.

The American counterattack had failed. Russia was untouched and was already landing troops on our coasts and dropping men from the skies.

All American leadership had been destroyed by the Washington hit and the nation drifted like a rudderless boat in a storm.

Our retaliation *had* succeeded and Russia was destroyed but the authorities had roped off the contaminated areas and consigned the luckless ones to death, the vast ruins being too hot for rescue attempt.

There were even wilder rumors. Refugees approaching the borders of these areas were being shot down from grim necessity. They couldn't be allowed to bring the poison out.

Not all the rumors were on the gloomy side, only most of them. The more optimistic had it that the government was rallying and everything would be all right. The jets rocketing overhead were making surveys preparatory to giving intelligent aid.

Mike believed nothing he did not see for himself. Perhaps aid was coming but it wasn't there so it didn't matter. As he moved west there had been fewer and fewer cars until now there were none, and people plodded on through the reeking land on foot.

Their ability to take hardship was stupendous, he thought, and for this, he admired them. But until he came upon Sarah Turner and her two children, he made no effort to help anyone.

Why he chose them, he never knew. He didn't even ask himself the question. When he approached them

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they were huddled by the side of the road, beaten and spent, watching the others move by. Johnny was defiant. He crouched beside his mother with a sharp, animal look in his eyes as though he were ready to spring at any moment to her defense.

Mike walked up to them and stood looking down. They stared back in silence until Sarah Turner whispered, "We have nothing."

There was fear of violence in her face and Mike thought that perhaps they had received rough treatment. Theft and pillage had cropped out here and there.

"I have come cookies," Mike said, and extended the box. Johnny sat motionless as though suspecting a trick, but Barbara whimpered and seized the box.

"Thank you." Sarah Turner divided the four remaining pieces between the two children and for a few moments they were happy.

"Where are you from?"

"Philadelphia. We got out alive."

The city had been on the fringe of the third blast. *We got out alive* said it all. Mike did not inquire further.

"You shouldn't stay here."

"What's the point in moving on?"

"There's nothing here. There might be something ahead."

"We're very tired."

Sitting there was a kind of death and Mike could not permit it.

"Everyone is tired. I can carry the little girl."

He moved on now, slower because he had become four. Later, he found Jeanne Barns and her baby and became six.

Greta Rood was the last. It was late into the next day and Mike had gotten them some food by seizing onto a

scant handful or two of the supplies put forth by a conscience stricken town that had barred its undamaged streets to the refugees.

Greta Rood stood at the end of a stone wall watching the people pass. She leaned easily and gracefully—Mike thought—against one of the boulders, and had a competent, self-sufficient air about her.

Perhaps that was what prompted him to approach her. "I have three children with me. One is a baby. They need food."

If she'd said, "I have myself. That's quite enough," he would not have been surprised nor would he have thought less of her. Earlier, he might have said that himself.

But she did not. She followed his eyes and saw the children.

"Bring them over here. But quietly. Don't attract attention."

He went and got his group, bringing them over casually as though they were only stopping to rest. Greta had not moved.

"Behind the rocks there. Out of sight. You'll find a sack. Take the children back there and feed them. But be quiet."

Mike lounged beside the big blonde Scandanavian while the two women took their children behind the wall.

"If any of them gets suspicious and comes here, you'll have to fight."

"If it's necessary."

Greta was watching the passersby from behind a look of casual noninterest. "That big man. He was watching. But maybe he'll think the kids went to the toilet."

Mike spotted the man and watched him pass on.

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Greta raised her voice just slightly without turning her head. "Open one of the cans of milk and mix it with the corn meal for the baby. Give the older ones bread but no milk."

She seemed to assume that her orders would be obeyed without question and Mike knew they would be. Leadership, in such situations as this automatically asserted itself.

"You're alone," Mike commented.

"My husband and father were killed. We had a farm. They tried to defend it from a band of raiders."

"You were fortunate to escape."

"They took everything in sight and went on their way."

"I'm sorry."

It was the closest Mike had come so far to naked viciousness but he knew it had become a part of this nightmare.

"As you said—I was lucky."

"We're moving on. You can come with us if you like. Or would you rather go it alone?"

She was measuring him with calm objectivity; mainly, Mike thought, with an eye to his muscles and his general efficiency as a traveling companion in this new and sudden world.

"I'll go with you."

And that was that. They picked up no more along the way because all the groups had been pretty well formed by now and the loners were that from choice.

They secreted the rest of Greta's food on their persons.

And now it was the sixth day and the food was gone and the passing jets had become things to hate and per-

haps gain a little strength thereby but everyone knew this could not go on much longer.

Thus, the town ahead loomed in importance.

The other men, twelve in number, had gathered again and Greta stood watching them. "How soon will they become ravenous enough to attack?"

"Before long, I think. But not this village. It would be slaughter. The next one perhaps."

"But we must try. We owe it to the children."

"I'll go up and talk to them again."

"I'll go with you."

"There's no point in it. I'll make another appeal."

Greta turned to Jeanne Barns. "Give me the baby."

Jeanne handed her daughter over. "What are you going to do?"

"We're going up to talk to the men guarding the town. They will not shoot. There is no danger if we only ask. We owe it to the children to try."

"Maybe it will work," Mike said. "But I can carry the baby. You wait here."

"I will go . . ."

This had been a farming country and there were wagons and they had been brought into the village to be strung around it. The men waited behind the wagons with their rifles and pistols.

They were men of various types and had various capacities in meeting trouble and danger. Some were very quiet, giving no clue as to their inner fiber. Others shouted defiance at those less fortunate than themselves.

In this latter group, there was some drunkenness, making these men boisterous and harsh. As he and Greta approached, Mike noted that there was no more leadership than there had been during his first visit. Either

the leaders of the village were weak or no one had been appointed to direct the defense.

One man did stand somewhat apart and seemed more soberly thoughtful than the rest. He was elderly, but looked very fit. He had a bronzed lined face and a crown of snow white hair he wore like a halo.

The man had bothered Mike before. He did not seem to be a stranger.

"You bringing the blonde to barter with?" One of the drunken men called out raucously, and others joined in.

These cat calls were scattered, however, and appeared to embarrass the majority of the village's defenders.

"Move on," the white-haired man said sharply. "We feel sorry for you, but we can't help."

"This baby is hungry," Greta called out. "Do you want its death on your conscience?"

"We told the others—we have babies of our own. If we served one or a dozen of yours, we'd be overwhelmed. It isn't that we're being cruel. It's just a choice of who dies—your children or ours."

"None of us need die," Mike said. "Help will come. There will be food for all."

"Haven't you heard, buster?" A raucous voice called. "The Roosians are on the way."

"That's nonsense. The government is slowly getting back on its feet. The jets prove that."

"The hell with the jets."

Mike took a step forward.

"Stay where you are! The next step is a slug. We aren't fooling around."

There was drunken laughter. "Send the blonde over. We'll dicker."

Mike was staring at the white-haired man. "You look

familiar, mister. My name is Mike Strong. Haven't we met somewhere before?"

"My name is Paul Bender and we've met nowhere. I suggest you be on your way. Some of these men have had too much to drink. They're not too reliable."

In the far background, other groups of refugees had gathered to watch and hope. Now, Mike and Greta not having returned, they took heart and began moving slowly forward.

"Get out of here!" one of the more timid defenders yelled. "You're making them think we're giving in, but we ain't. Get the hell back right now or I'll drop you!"

"Good God!" Mike cried out. "You're men! You're human beings! You can't—"

A rifle cracked.

Greta's body jerked. Her eyes closed tightly and then opened. The color drained from her face.

"Take the baby."

Mike turned to her and saw the blood on her breast.

"Take the baby."

Greta remained erect until the infant passed safely into Mike's arms. Then she slumped to the ground.

The men behind the barricade went silent. Mike turned on them. "You rotten, filthy, murderers!"

He waited for a second gun to bark, then remembered that he had the baby and turned to shield it with his body as his eyes burned out at Paul Bender.

"Can't you control your animals?"

Bender's face was ashen also. "I'm sorry. But it's done. Go back! Go back now before this turns into slaughter. These people will not feed you . . .

. . . not feed you—

—not feed you

The words echoed in Mike's ears like wind in a hollow, ghastly place . . .

6

"YOU'RE SURE it was I?" Paul Bender asked.

Mike lay on Bender's lounge. An untouched scotch was on the coffee table beside him.

"It was you. You spoke your name. I couldn't be mistaken."

Bender's light, brisk approach to Mike Strong's problem was no longer in evidence. His pipe was cold and ash-filled in his hand as he stared at it.

"It's a fantastic coincidence that you should move into another plane and out of the millions of people in existence, meet me."

"Maybe it isn't. Whatever all this is, it's still under the control of natural laws. There are patterns of affinity that would not necessarily be restricted to one plane. Perhaps, somewhere or other on this plane, I've met or seen the others too. Or maybe I'll meet them later."

"That could be."

"One thing is certain. I'm getting deeper and deeper into this pattern. This time I found myself sitting on a bench on the campus. And I was beat—utterly beat. I brought back the physical whaling I took during those six days. I lost ten pounds for one thing."

"Where were you when the transition took place?"

"I'd dropped Donna off at her apartment and was walking home. That was at eleven o'clock."

Paul Bender pulled up the sleeve of his dressing gown and looked at his watch. "Its five-fifteen a.m. now. It appears that you dropped off this plane for an entire night."

"But there's still no proof—no record of my condition here while I was on the other plane. I may have stopped to sit down on a bench on the campus and gone to sleep. I want to know my exact condition here when my consciousness goes somewhere else. Maybe I just walked around all night."

"There's certainly no integrated time pattern involved."

"But this thing is getting worse. What part of me leaves? What part stays?"

"Your awareness is transferred, obviously. It seems to me there is a clue in what we know about consciousness. We're familiar with three kinds in general, of course—simple, self, and cosmic. The simple consciousness of the animal comes first; the consciousness of the cat that is aware but still can't look at itself and say 'I am a cat'. It is instinctively subjective at all times, its awareness subject at all times to instinct and outside influence."

Mike was staring flatly into space and Paul Bender was speaking mainly to quiet him and take him off his emotional edge.

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"Self-consciousness, the point of development through which a living thing can look at itself and say, 'I am' is the mark of the human being's progress. But even this is not continuous with him. When a man is in deep concentration in any area except upon himself personally, he does not have self-consciousness. He is unaware of all things except that upon which he is concentrating. Then of course, there is cosmic consciousness which comes only to a few people. This is an indescribable awareness of all things as one. Those who have experienced it describe it as best they can but there are really no words through which we ordinary mortals can be allowed to understand it. Richard Bucke's book, *Cosmic Consciousness* is an exhaustive study on the subject."

Mike scowled in irritation. "The book I'd be interested in reading hasn't been written yet."

"Perhaps you'll write it, then."

"Right now it would be filled with nothing but question marks. One thing that bothers me is this: What I just went through, was the world that came about when things went wrong during the Cuban situation. If individuals form splinter lives for themselves at times of decisive crisis, it's beginning to appear that nations do also. The prime question at the time was whether or not an atomic war would break out. On the plane I visited it did."

"What is your question?"

"Just this. You and I both exist on that other plane, but why with different backgrounds than we have on this one? Prior to the forking of the planes at that time the planes were identical. They were one. What had to happen was that a single plane split and became two. Why were we there with different backgrounds than we have here?"

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"I don't think it was one plane splitting into two. I think we have to go back to the theory that life is not a preformed structure. Everything ahead of us is pliable stuff, so to speak—a vast potential waiting to be formed into patterns of living."

"I've never agreed with that theory."

"Nevertheless, it has its points. If we apply it to this situation we arrive on less confusing ground. Then, regardless of what happens, we still have each individual forming his own world and going his own way—living by some psycho-mystic process, many lives at once."

"Psycho-mystic," Mike muttered wryly. "That's quite a word."

"Isn't it though? I just invented it. But I think we do answer your question. The movements of nations is nothing more than the concerted movements of individuals. Therefore, the atomic war was brought about by a mass of individuals who influenced things in that direction."

"Your *psycho-mystic* sleuthing has big holes in it."

"Of course," Paul Bender admitted. "It's exploratory. It has to have holes."

"Then let's see you fill this one up: Your logic brings me to a point—because I exist on both planes—where I helped cause an atomic war and I didn't. So I participated in both war and not-war. You take it from there."

Paul Bender was slow in answering. He studied his worn, harassed friend and spoke quietly. "You're going to have to do that, Mike. You're the one with the phenomenal awareness that spans all the planes."

"But it keeps leaving me hanging by my fingernails. What happened to Solonoff? Did I kill the hood in my apartment? If so, did they electrocute me for it? And

did the starving refugees overrun that miserable village?"

"Perhaps you'll find out. Perhaps not."

"Another interesting question. If I'm killed on any of those planes, do I die here also?"

"I'm inclined to think not. I still cling to the belief that this is the key existence if for no other reason than you keep being drawn back to it. Another point occurs to me—"

"What is it?"

"That on all the planes to which your awareness jumped, your *self* was involved in violence. Maybe that gives us another key—certainly a clue. Those splinter lives may be generated by our subconscious desire for violence."

"Then what about the people who experience it on this plane?"

"Another hole we have to fill," Paul Bender said blandly.

But the answer to an earlier question was in the process of forming. Paul Bender was saying, "I wish to heaven I could—"

—"You're the darndest guy I ever met," Mike said.

Miguel Hernandez, to whom he spoke and also referred, grinned gaily and looked down the mountain-side at the bridge below.

"Why do you say that, señor? I am a simple man."

"That's it. You're a simple man. You have no education. You can hardly write your own name. Yet you spout philosophies that would floor Plato."

"And who is this Plato?"

"An old Greek."

Mike followed Miguel's eyes and studied the bridge

below. It looked like a toy span across a toy river and one got the feeling from that high vantage point that it could be destroyed by a flick of a child's finger.

But such was not the case. The job would take an appreciable amount of dynamite and an act of commando stealth that would test the ability of a superior man.

Miguel had shrugged. "My philosophies are feeble things, señor. They are my own and because I have no education they are probably ridiculous."

Mike's brow was furrowed by a scowl. "How did you put that, again?"

"I merely said that I think there is no such thing as size or distance. They are only—what do you say—?"

"Illusions."

"Illusions," Miguel said proudly. "It is a nice word. I like it. I will remember it and use it."

"Then it follows in your thinking that there is no real difference in the size of a mountain and a walnut—a planet and a pineapple."

Miguel's teeth were so brilliantly white, he could almost use them for night-signaling. They flashed now. "Between a mouse and an elephant, Señor Michael."

"And it's no farther down to that bridge than it is to—" He looked around. "—Juan's grave over there."

They had buried Juan that morning. One of the snipers guarding the bridge had gotten him through a telescope sight. Still, it had been a remarkable shot and the rebels had marveled at the sniper's skill. Squarely in the heart.

Miguel's sunny mood was dampened momentarily by a touch of sadness. "Sí," he replied.

"But what do you base that on?"

"I base it on another idea—that time is only a—what do you say—?"

"A device."

"Sí. A device of God that He invented for us to use."

"But upon what logic—?"

"A most simple one. Time traps us. We have to wait for it. It must pass for us and it will not be slowed or speeded up."

"That's true."

"Then," Miguel announced triumphantly, "God is all. God is the greatest. He made everything. So would he trap himself in one of his own inventions?"

Mike sat silent. Miguel's ideas were for the birds. They were against all logic and made no sense. But what interested Mike was the nagging certainty that he'd heard them all before; somewhere else; under radically different circumstances. Also, he suspected that he resented Miguel having them. What right had an unlettered peon to soaring abstractions even though they were patently cockeyed?

"Where do you think Juan went after he was shot?" Mike asked.

"Why to heaven, of course. Where else would an honest peon go? Especially one who gave his life to the cause of his beloved land?"

There was some dispute about whose cause was right or wrong in respect to the "beloved land" but that wasn't the point that held Mike's attention. "Then you think there is a heaven."

"Certainly, Señor Mike. There is also a hell where the evil writhe in agony for all eternity." Mike's Latin namesake smiled in satisfaction. "That is where Gomez, that vile dictator will go."

"You're sure?"

"Oh, yes. Otherwise, we would be fighting for an un-

just cause, you and I. And we know that our cause is just."

"That sniper who killed Juan. He also *thinks* his cause is just."

Miguel dismissed the assassin with a shrug. "He is a pig. He will die horribly."

Actually, Mike Strong was fighting for no cause other than his own. He was doing the job at hand for a price—paid in gold—that would eventually find its way into a Swiss bank—if Mike survived. As to the justice and injustice of the local situation, he was divided in opinion. Gomez had done much for this backward country. And he planned to do more. But his methods *were* harsh. This was no democracy, and the self-applied label of Republic, was a joke.

"You believe in our cause do you not, señor?" Miguel asked the question wistfully.

"I can't honestly say that I do. But it doesn't matter. I came to help you and when it's over, I'll leave."

"Sí," Miguel agreed. "It does not matter. But I will pray for you after you are gone."

"Just so you don't stop to pray during the raid, amigo."

Miguel yawned and stretched. "It is time for siesta, Señor Mike. You will sleep?"

"I think not. I'll stay here. I want to think over the plan."

Miguel got up and wandered away but Mike's mind would not stay upon the attack plan. Actually, it made no difference. The plan had been laid out. There had been a dry run. Some changes had been made. It would work or it wouldn't. He had acquired a steadiness that was a factor in his reliability. Had the occasion de-

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manded, he could have slept peacefully right up to the moment of a dangerous undertaking.

But he was well rested and did not need sleep. And the sense of uneasiness he was experiencing *was* a new thing. He'd analyzed it to a point where he was certain it had nothing to do with the expedition against the bridge. Then from whence did it come?

Something he was supposed to remember. But what? Every detail of the raid had been worked out with precision. So he dismissed the possibility of a lapse in that direction and sought elsewhere. This led him nowhere but into pondering his past. And it suddenly struck him as odd, almost grotesque, that he, Michael Strong, should be where he was.

Still nagged by the uneasiness, he went back in memory to where the crux point of his life had intruded. Or at least, that was his intention. Knowing that such a moment had come was simple; locating it was more difficult.

He'd been headed for an academic career. His father had been a teacher as had his grandfather and two uncles. So, never having been rebellious in any sense, he created stark consternation within his family by announcing quite suddenly that he intended to travel.

His father had questioned him. "Where to?"

"I don't know."

"For how long a time?"

"I haven't got the least idea."

"But you're right in the middle of your second post-graduate year."

Mike acknowledged this.

"Therefore, isn't it a little foolish to go running off?"

"To you, I suppose, it would be. To me, it seems the most sensible thing in the world."

He could recall that at the time, he'd come in contact with a remarkable fellow, a man in his late thirties who'd been invited to give a lecture to a student assembly on the political conditions in South America. The man, one Paul Bender, had attracted Mike strongly. And Mike had been shocked by his attitude as revealed later at a local bar.

Bender had a prodigious education, a string of letters after his name that had been acquired effortlessly. But it was his dramatic life that had spotlighted him as a glamorous figure.

"Everything I told them tonight was meaningless," he confided over a triple scotch sipped straight. "They'll have forgotten it by morning."

This annoyed Mike. "Then why did you bother to lecture?"

"I needed the money. I've got to meet a man in India and I can hardly walk it."

He told of much he had done and found and of many things he intended to investigate. Then he said, "Pegged down neatly in their little slots, people aren't really interested in *knowing*. You can't know unless you see and feel and taste and smell. And life is very short, my friend."

Life is very short. The point struck Mike forcibly. But of course he wasn't the type to lunge forth and live it in the manner Bender lived it.

Still, a week later, on a short trip to a place no more dangerous than any other trout fishing stream, Mike suddenly realized he did not want to go back to the classroom.

Yes, that was how and where it had happened. Odd, that he'd never given Bender any credit before. Now he himself was in his late thirties. Only God knew where

Bender was. Mike had vaguely hoped to meet him sometime. Mike's career, he supposed, would now be rated as fabulous by some of the students who had heard Bender that night. But he realized that far more of them would consider him an idiot.

None of it really mattered, however. The only important thing was that toy bridge down there. That and the lives of the men who would help him destroy it. What about his own life? Mike considered that point carefully and decided that he was honestly not afraid; that he had never really known fear as he interpreted it in other men. Death, as was life, would be a great experience. And, even as the world turned, all in due time.

There was a rustling beside him and the girl Pepita stood there.

Pepita contradicted the gay implication of her name. There was nothing vivacious about her. She was slim and dark and very beautiful but she symbolized death rather than life in her black dress and shawl. But there was something about her that made the description not quite accurate. Death, yes, but vital death; death with importance and dignity. Pepita was the fertility symbol who walked behind the coffins of dead men on the way to their places of burial. Life, strong and vital, following death as though to disprove it; waiting patiently to breed more men to fight and die and be carried to cemeteries. Pepita was patience and acceptance.

She looked down at the far bridge, her face expressionless. "It will be very dangerous."

"Yes."

"Miguel will not return."

"That's a bad way to think."

"It is true. Miguel and two others."

"Which two?"

"I do not know."

"You are in love with him?"

"No. There is no time for love in these days. But Miguel is good. He has fought for the cause. He has not had time to find a woman of his own and he deserves a son."

"It's as simple as that?"

"Why should it not be simple? There is life—there is death."

"Pepita, if the rebels do win—suppose all the aspirations of your people are won. Would you, your people, know how to live with them—enjoy them?"

Pepita had had some education. She was the literate one of the group. She carefully considered Mike's question before countering with one of her own. "You mean that we have been revolutionaries for so long that it has become a way of life?"

"I don't know. I was asking."

"Perhaps for us—yes. But for our children—Miguel's son—"

"You're sure that you're pregnant?"

"I am sure."

"And that it will be a boy."

"It will be a boy."

He studied her dark beauty. "If I had asked you, would you have given me a son?"

"No, señor."

"If love is not necessary—why not?"

"You are not one of us. What we fight for means nothing to you. A little more gold and you would have been on the other side. To bear a man's child, that is sacred."

"May he be as good a man as his father," Mike said . . .

They left in pitch blackness on a night when there was

no moon. They were a part of the night in their black clothing and soot-smeared faces. They crawled down the steep mountain and one man was left behind when he broke an ankle halfway down.

Mike and two others wore thick rubber girdles inside which the dynamite, fuses, and timing devices were carried. The trip down took an hour and a half and then there was the foaming breadth of the river. It was imperative that they cross because Gomez had the near side so heavily guarded the chances of success would have been totally negative. The dictator general depended on the river for protection. He did not dream that even the *fanaticos* would be so foolhardy as to dash themselves to pieces in that riverbed of boulders.

But the hidden rope had not been discovered. It had been anchored on the other side by the third of three rebels who had attempted to worm down the other side two days earlier. Two had died in the heavily patrolled woods. And Mike had hoped that the rope found wrapped around the men had been seen as means of hoped-for escape from the loyalist side of the river. The third man had stayed successfully hidden and no check had been made since they managed to stretch the anchor rope across below water level the previous night; and none too soon because the annihilating offensive was scheduled for forty-eight hours and Gomez' superior forces storming across the bridge would have marked the end for all rebels of the political tumor called Matta Grosa Province.

But even with the rope, one man was lost. After the group reached the dry boulders and safety, the man was merely gone so they did not know how it had happened. Fortunately, he had been carrying no dynamite. The anchor man on Gomez' side greeted them with tears

that marked his relief and then led them downriver toward the bridge.

There were four cement stanchions that had to go and as Mike crawled along, he suddenly wondered if perhaps other men on other planes might not be attempting to blow other bridges apart; planes and men and bridges *ad finitum*, stretching away into a mirror—within-a-mirror maze until, somewhere, the repeated images bent back upon themselves and started over again.

But the thought was so patently ridiculous that it annoyed him. Daydreaming in a situation like this was a mark of diminishing fitness for dangerous endeavors. Besides, where could such a stupid thought come from?

They moved when the going was clear and froze when the patrols swung close. The patrols were not hard to see because Gomez' love of the parade ground somewhat blurred his good military sense. Soldiers wearing snowy white uniforms were vulnerable even in pitch darkness.

So the bridge was safely reached and the men moved to their job through the comparatively stiller water.

Fifteen minutes. The dynamite was in place. The fuses set. The time of escape swiftly passing. Halfway back to the rope a white uniformed guard moved along the cat-walk three feet above the rebel's heads.

And Domingo chose that moment to sneeze.

Mike Strong plunged upward as though he had been standing on springs. The guard, hit by formless force out of the darkness flung out his arm and it evaded Mike's reaching fingers. There was a single instant of pain and terror for the guard and then he was dead, no sound coming from him. But the flashlight, flung still-lit among the lower rocks was a signal. There was instant movement in two directions.

"Up here," Mike ordered. "It's faster. Make a run for the rope."

They fled along the catwalk while searchlights hunted them. One shaft pursued them and picked out the last man and he was dead from a dozen slugs as the light moved on.

"Over!" Mike yelled.

But they were close to the rope at a cost of but one life and that was a good exchange. They plunged down under the concealing shelf and sought the rope. It was still there.

"Okay," Mike said. "Hit it. They'll search the shore with their spots."

And they did until the group was halfway across the gorge. Then a loyalist who was entrusted with one of the lights but was too stupid to know that the fools would not plunge into the river, fingered his beam across and found them.

Miguel died with much lead in his brain. The others pulled the rope down and went deep. Choking, buffeted cruelly, they crawled along the rope, awaiting the instant the loyalists would cut it.

Three will die.

Pepita had said that and now three were dead. Would that be all?

In sudden and reckless defiance, as though attempting to prove her wrong, Mike surfaced and began crawling the last twenty yards with his head and shoulders above water.

As though he'd become drunk on danger, an exultation swept him. "The hell with you!" he yelled. "The hell with every goddam one of you!"

"—go with you on those trips." Paul Bender finished

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what he'd been saying and glanced up quickly. "I don't understand, Mike. The hell with whom?"

Mike didn't answer. He stared at his half empty glass. "What have I been doing?"

"Doing? You been sitting there talking to me."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing. I just said I wished to heaven I could go with you and you bawled out a general curse. Did something happen?"

"Yes. I just found out that somewhere back in the maze of my many lives, I admired you very much . . ."

7

"I DON'T QUITE KNOW what to make of you, Mike. You've changed."

"That's ridiculous. Why would I change?"

"I thought perhaps you could tell me."

They were in Mike's apartment with Donna curled up on the lounge. She was so magnetically feminine there in the intimate atmosphere with a single lamp glowing warmly, that Mike wanted to reach out and take her into his arms and assure her that everything was all right.

But everything was not all right and he could not bring himself to draw her into this cloud of confusion through which he groped.

"I can't think of a thing that's wrong," he replied. He forced a lightness into his voice and smiled.

"One of two things is wrong between us, I'm sure of that," Donna said.

"How about freshening up your glass?"

Donna ignored the offer. "Either you have something serious on your mind that you won't confide to me, or you think of me as a child, not yet worthy of confidence."

"Both these suppositions are illogically based," Mike said.

"Don't throw your schoolroom phrases at me," she flared. "I'm not one of your students."

"Greta—let's just relax and—"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, let's just relax and—"

"You said something more."

"I wasn't aware of it."

"I think you were. I saw it in your eyes. Who is she?"

"Who is whom?"

"Greta."

"Good lord! you're hearing things."

Donna sprang to her feet. "You're damned right I'm hearing things. I'm hearing whatever is said. The other day, I heard you mumble Lorry while you were waking up. Now I heard Greta. Is that why you've had so little time for me lately? Are you rationing your presence among too many other women?"

"Donna, it isn't like that at all."

She was glaring, with her arms folded and her eyes flashing.

"Very well. If you wish to explain, I'll give you two minutes to tell me how it really is."

"I've been having dreams—"

The words, hauled out of nowhere, sounded so stupidly inane that Mike bit them off.

"I see. Which of your women do you usually dream about?"

"Donna! Be sensible. We aren't engaged. I don't owe you any explanations."

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Perhaps she hadn't expected such a direct attack. Her face whitened and her look said that the hurt went deep.

Desperate, Mike flung away all caution and consideration. "What have you done for me except get into my way and pry into my business?"

Some of the rage and hurt on her face blurred behind a new look; or rather an old look. Hope was still there.

"Mike—tell me in plain words. If I'm wrong I'll get down on my knees and apologize. I fully realize that there has been no formal understanding between us, but I still won't share you with other women. It's all or nothing with me."

"What do you want me to tell you?"

"That I'm wrong—that Lorry and Greta don't actually exist."

He was very slow in answering. As he remained silent, her hope faded.

"They don't exist—and they do. It's very difficult to explain, Donna. I—"

He stopped. There was no use going on. Donna had snatched up her purse and the door had slammed behind her.

Mike went to the window and watched as she moved off down Faculty Lane. Her head was high and her step was firm. But as she passed house after house, her step became less decisive. Her shoulders drooped and she came slowly to a halt.

Mike's spirit came up out of the ashes and called to her. But that was only for a moment. What good would it do if she returned? He couldn't talk to her. He could not tell her. It would be the same scene replayed.

Don't come back honey, he called out silently. And she obeyed. She turned again and went slowly out of sight.

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Mike went to the liquor cabinet and poured a double scotch. It went down easily.

And even that bothered him. It went down too easily. He'd been emptying too many bottles too fast and it really wasn't helping a bit . . .

. . . Forget about the couch," Mike said. "I'll sit here by your desk."

"As you wish," Dr. Bell said.

He was a plump, balding man who had switched to psychiatry after five years of medical practice because he'd seen it as a coming thing and saw no reason why he shouldn't serve in that area just as competently. The location of his office, near a thriving college, was no accident. He'd found it to be no myth that higher intellects are more prone to mental confusion than the average person. He had built a fairly good practice among people involved directly with the school.

"The accepted theory, of course," Mike said, "is that the patient should discover truths for himself. But I think it's time you told me a few things."

Hostility. Dr. Bell made a note of it and said, "What do you want me to tell you?"

"Your opinions concerning my case."

"Logic and psychology are somewhat akin. What is your opinion."

"You realize certainly that that question, and ninety percent of your other ones could be asked by any unskilled laborer in town."

"I'm curious about the source of your sudden hostility."

"The fifty dollars a week I'm paying you?"

"You feel you haven't gotten your money's worth?"

"It's not that. And I'm not hostile to you personally. My quarrel is with psychiatry in general."

"For any particular reason?"

"Fraud."

Dr. Bell seemed to be considering that on its merits.
"You feel defrauded?"

"Not I. I had my own reasons for coming to you—"

"And they were—"

"To prove my own theory. Later, I expected to incorporate my findings in a book."

"Did you prove your theory?"

"Yes."

"And what was it?"

"That psychiatry is a dangerous form of therapy, when practiced by the morally unequipped, wherein the patient does his own diagnosing."

"His own diagnosing! Good lord."

Mike enjoyed disturbing the serene waters of Dr. Bell's surface. It happened so seldom. "Exactly. Can you conceive of a patient going to a physician and saying, 'Doctor, I have a brain tumor. I'd like to take it out.' And with the physician replying, 'Certainly, wait until I get my knife.'"

"A somewhat exaggerated reference, don't you think?"

"Perhaps, but people who consider themselves mentally ill walk into psychiatrists every day, just as I did, and arrange to have long extended periods of treatment for these fancied ills."

"Fancied?"

"Then you're saying that everyone who comes to a psychiatrist needs treatment?"

"Of course not."

"Doc, how many patients have you refused to treat in the last year?"

"I'm afraid that's privileged information."

"It certainly is. I didn't expect an answer. But tell me

this—how many psychiatrists do you think have the moral fiber to turn away twenty-five or fifty dollars a week they can pick up for an hour or so of their time?”

“You’re assuming psychiatrists are without integrity?”

Dr. Bell had gathered himself and showed no resentment. His attitude was quietly thoughtful.

“Let’s go back to you,” he said when Mike didn’t answer. “You’re very sure you were in no need of mental therapy?”

“That’s a silly question.”

“Why?”

“Because the answer is a matter of opinion and your license gives you more authority in court. You could call me a dangerous schizo and get serious consideration from the authorities.”

“Are we going to court?”

“You’re being purposely devious. You’re well aware of my meaning.”

“Of course I am.”

“All right. You’ve taken my money for close to a year now. If there’s nothing mentally wrong with me, you’re a fraud. If there is, I owe you an apology. So give me your verdict. And don’t fall back on the old cliché that nobody is entirely normal mentally.”

“You’ve got a separation of some sort, Mike.”

“A separation? I’ve got a hunch that’s your own term—the lead word in the obscure hodgepodge that’s coming.”

“It is my own term. I hesitate to use the term schizophrenic because there’s something unique in your condition. Schizo does apply, however.”

“What have been your clues to this mysterious condition?”

Dr. Bell was leafing back in his notebook. “On four oc-

casions," he said, "You became very tired during your session. Do you recall them?"

"I remember that there were a few times I preferred a nap to your questions."

"They occurred on—"

"Never mind the dates. I'll concede the siestas."

"Very well, during the first one, you discussed a theoretical political situation."

"While I was unconscious?"

"Your pulse, respiration, and general condition indicated sleep the whole time."

"What was the political situation?"

Dr. Bell's attention was solely on his notes now. "It seemed that Napoleon was not defeated at Waterloo. Wellington blundered badly and within six months, Napoleon was in control of all Europe. You talked authoritatively from a historical standpoint, the gist of it being that because of Napoleon's victory at Waterloo, communism never got a foothold in Russia later on."

"Then under that situation there was no Russian Revolution?"

"There was. But it was of the French variety. They established a republic."

Mike's mind was working. He did not in any way doubt Dr. Bell and accepted the revelation with only slight shock. It was almost as though he'd expected something of the sort and that the cynicism he'd hurled at Bell had been merely bait.

The point that flashed first had to do with timing in his strange malady. The splinter lives in which his prime life awareness had participated all took place in current time. So far as he could judge, those lives ran simultaneously with the prime life, all moving into the future.

Therefore, when Dr. Bell referred to his consciousness

of the past, thus implying a participation in past lives, he was confused.

But then, he realized that there had been no personal awareness of the Napoleon thing. He had merely talked about it.

And until further proof was forthcoming he would assume that he'd been merely expounding historical data garnered from some splinter life to which his awareness had not taken him.

He realized that he had accepted Paul Bender's theory of prime life and splinter lives and saw no reason, from anything Dr. Bell had told him, for discarding it. In fact, he felt that the theory was now strengthened.

"There were three others?"

"In the next one, George Washington accepted the monarchy offered him by the founding fathers. This, for reasons that you did not go into, left the British Empire intact up to the present day, the balance of power lying between the British and the empire that the Japanese formed, unimpeded in the East."

"Interesting."

Obviously, Mike thought, his unconscious historical lectures on Dr. Bell's couch had been symptoms of what was to come, a preliminary condition with the ability to shift awareness as the next step. But this later ability—was it the end pattern, or merely another step in some broader pattern of abnormal development?

He refused to allow fear of this to jar him. "You'd better let me have the rest of it."

"During the third interlude, you saw two nations in what is now continental United States."

Mike had made a mental note that during the couch sessions, he had been aware of the alternatives, a condi-

tion that did not exist when he went consciously into other lives.

"The South defeated the North in the Civil War?"

"No. The French refused to part with Louisiana. There was no Purchase."

"The land was never acquired?"

"No."

"What was the result?"

"I don't know. Your nap was very short that day."

"Tell me this—did I speak of how things would have been *if* these things had happened?"

"No. You talked as though they *had* happened."

"But there must have been some structure of comparison—or was I merely giving you history lessons?"

"You spoke as though things existed both ways—as you saw them in your fantasies, and as they really are."

"I seem to have a very busy subconscious, do I not?"

Dr. Bell did not comment on that. "The fourth one had it that the United States Senate ratified Wilson's promises to Europe and we joined the old League of Nations."

"This changed things?"

"Somewhat."

"And what conclusions have you drawn concerning my case?"

"One point interests me. Your separations all concerned history—decisive historical decisions going in the opposite direction. Yet, you're a logician. You teach logic."

"So—?"

"It seems strange that you never made mention of things bearing on the logical and philosophical structure of things. It seems to me you would have become subconsciously preoccupied with the state of the world if

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ancient Greece had been destroyed in its infancy; or if Newton or Plato had never been born."

"Perhaps I'm a historian at heart."

Dr. Bell paused for a long moment, then asked, "Mike, are you keeping something from me?"

"From what you've told me, I appear to have opened my ego pretty wide."

"There has been more, though?"

"Let's say that there has been further confusion."

"I'd like the details."

"Not now. If I'm correct, we've used up more than the forty-five minutes. I'm on someone else's time."

"Don't let that bother you."

"But it does."

Mike got up from his chair and lit a cigarette. Dr. Bell regarded him thoughtfully. "Will I see you again?" The question indicated new doubts in Bell's mind. He had never before made any such inquiry of Mike.

"It's an uncertain world, Doc," Mike smiled. "Who knows . . . ?"

As he left Dr. Bell's office, Mike became aware of a physical tension that had crept over him so slowly that only the aching of tightened jaw muscles brought it to his attention. He consciously forced himself to loosen up even as he recognized and excused the cause.

It was natural for a man to stiffen up while waiting to be kited, at any moment, into a different world. It was a little like waiting for someone to dump a bucket of ice water on your head . . .

8

MIKE STUDIED the faces of his class. He had achieved, it seemed, a new perception as to the caliber of each mind. Was this a byproduct of his new inner condition? He supposed that probably it was somehow related, but he gave the question scant thought. The perceptions were fascinating and there was no point in questioning them.

For instance, Lathan Mott was, at the moment, deeply preoccupied with a problem in logic. Would it be more logical to leave Kane College at the end of this term and enroll in a larger school where his prowess as a running back would attract greater attention?

"Why didn't you enroll at UCLA in the first place, Lathan?"

"Well, you see my father went to—huh?"

A titter ran through the class. Lathan's face reddened and there was anger in his eyes.

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"Never mind," Mike said. "More important—did you crack the Dialogues last night?"

"Yes, sir," Mott snapped back.

The class had been waiting for the start of his lecture and now he made the opening statement.

"We spend most of our time skirting truth and never reaching it. Most of what we are told to believe is not true. Our whole logical and philosophical basis is false. Things that we see as absolutes are, in the main, fallacies and variables."

Puzzled, the class waited.

"For instance," Mike went on. "There is no such thing as relative size or relative distances. All things are of equal size. The distance between all things is the same."

There was mass silence during which a single hand came slowly aloft.

"Professor, what logical basis is there for such a theory?"

"We depend too much on what we see as logical," Mike replied.

"But—"

"Let's examine ourselves for a moment. What are we? We are conscious entities solely dependent for our impressions on the five senses that evolutionary nature has given us. We see, we taste, we smell, we feel, we hear. But none of these senses necessarily report true."

If he was stirring a flood of confusion in the class, Mike was fanning even more so a wave of recklessness in himself.

"While we are allegedly spiritual beings, we defend on the material for our total existence. The flesh and the senses govern, whether we wish it or not."

Three hands went up. Mike ignored them.

"At times, it would appear that two forces are at work

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within us—the power of the flesh and the power of the spirit. This struggle was symbolized by the biblical account of Lucifer's struggle with the archangel Michael. So, in essence, we dream of the spiritual, but our true loyalties are to the sensual."

The students were regarding him strangely and looking to each other for clues. No one seemed to have any.

"The point is that nature, the mistress and creator of our tools, our five senses, can make us believe anything she wishes us to believe. And most of what she allows us to see is illusion. We function in three dimensions and struggle feebly with a fourth. Yet common sense tells us that there must be an infinite number of dimensions."

Sonya Payne raised her hand.

"Professor Strong, do you really feel that we have a right to allow the sensual—the flesh, that is—to dominate our lives?"

Mike, struggling with his own thought processes—trying to decide where his outbursts were leading him—frowned in annoyance at the interruption.

"Of course. How else can we be other than immobile blobs of flesh other than through the sensual?"

"Thank you, Professor," Sonya said demurely, and pressed her knees chastely together as she settled back into her seat.

"Whether we care to admit it or not," Mike said, "we are still almost totally controlled by simple consciousness. From what is actually a dim, groping awareness—an ability to weakly challenge what we see as her cruelties and brutalities—we still obey nature's commands because we must—because only in obedience lies our chances of survival. And, most craftily, for reasons of

her own, nature has implanted within us, that senseless urge to survive."

The class gasped. Curious eyes were—

—staring at him.

But that made no difference. He'd grown used to them during the thousand years since he'd lost all sense of time and the passing hours.

It was a fairish crowd because this was Saturday and school vacation time and all the marks were out. The audience was kids, mostly, staring blank-eyed down into his pen, their mouths filthy with ice cream and sticky candy. He still had enough interest in life to vaguely analyze the looks of the marks. The women always registered horror with a sprinkling of unrealized fascination. The men were invariably contemptuous and the children usually stared at him with purely academic interest.

The talker's hoarse voice was especially irritating to Mike on this particular afternoon. He'd slept badly and would have preferred to go for the throat of the talker rather than that of the chicken.

"... Is he really going to eat that rooster raw, Daddy?"

"Wait and see, honey."

"Ladies and gentleman, you see here one of God's most pitiful and amazing creatures—a man who reverted to the animal under hardship and duress."

Mike twisted his filthy, bearded face into a snarl to help the talk along and make a tentative swipe at the rooster that was there in the tan-bark stewn pen with him.

"Once, ladies and gentleman, this pitiful creature was a man—even as you and I—a very famous man, but that was long ago..."

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One of Mike's vague spells fogged his mind. Long ago. What had happened long ago? Nothing that he could think of. The talker's spiel was beginning to get him. He closed his eyes and then opened them to snarl again and bring a thrill of revulsion to the marks who had paid their quarters to be shocked.

". . . I will not tell you his name, ladies and gentlemen—the name he used when he walked among us, a man among men. He was an explorer, called the greatest of them all by many of his fellows. He was famous for going boldly into dangerous and far away places and it was on one of these trips—a safari into the Amazon jungles—that disaster struck . . ."

The stupid, blithering idiot! He could at least keep his terms straight. Mike, to get an extra pint of gin a day had written the speech for the illiterate but he'd used the proper word—expedition. The rooster peered at him warily through one eye as he wondered why the inaccuracy of the word *safari* had so disturbed him. What difference did it make what the cretin said? Nobody believed any of it.

". . . and during that last adventure, disaster struck. He was captured and tortured by a little known tribe of head-hunting savages far up that legendary river. They did not kill him, ladies and gentlemen . . ."

"Sam Grant! Are you out of your mind? Allowing the children to see *that!*"

An irate mother had tracked down her husband and two small girls and was now chastising him in a harsh whisper. The man cringed and looked sheepish as he whispered back.

"Gosh, May! It won't hurt them. We came in to see the snakes and this here—"

The beleaguered husband hesitated, not knowing

quite what to call Mike and the woman cut in to lash at him again.

"I don't care why you came in here. You should have more sense than to expose their young minds to such a degrading spectacle!"

"He's going to eat the chicken raw, Mommy!"

"Well, you'll not see him do it!"

For a long moment, as she herded her young from the pen, the woman's eyes were on Mike and his eyes were on the woman. It was one of those amusingly subtle moments Mike had experienced with other females and in his sober times he'd tried to form something tangible from them; the useless pastime of a man who had no pastimes.

The anger in the woman's eyes became overshadowed by that *attraction-revulsion* look. Mike put lust and obscene desire into his face and leered at her and they spoke silently to each other.

Then she was gone and the moment was over. Funny how you could spot them; strange how sometimes you could read the thoughts flaming through their lives, making them miserable; locked in lava boiling for release; the need for animal degradation latent in so many females.

Latent in Peggy . . .

". . . When he was rescued, ladies and gentlemen, it was too late. The tragedy had already taken place. He was brought back to civilization, the animal you now see before you. But do not pity him. In his poor, blind fashion, he is happy. He is living as he learned to live—thinking like an animal—living like an animal—eating only raw food like the most savage of animals . . ."

It was time to climax the act. Mike snarled, frightening all the children, and seized the rooster. He allowed

it to squawk in terror several times before he drove his teeth into its neck and drew blood.

". . . And now, ladies and gentlemen, on the platform to your right, the Electric Man. He defies death . . ."

Mike closed his eyes. In five minutes the tent would be cleared and he could escape to the bottle hidden in Peggy's wagon . . .

Fifteen minutes later, Peggy climbed in and looked down at the sprawled length of him in her bunk. She was carrying a brown paper bag and she wiped sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

"I brung you a couple of hamburgers."

He opened his eyes and grunted wordlessly but did not move. On the floor beside him sat an empty gin bottle.

"Wipe the blood off your mouth and eat 'em, honey."

She sat down on the edge of the bunk and he felt her soft hip against his thigh. She was all hot flesh eternally poised on the brink of passion. Sweat darkened the blue apron under her arms and as she raised a hand reaching for a towel overhead, he could see the short, black stubble in her arm pits.

"You got to eat, honey. You can't live on gin."

He'd known her for a month. Five weeks earlier, he'd staggered into the carny after a vague, stumbling time elsewhere and asked for a job because the terror of being without gin had been upon him.

They'd needed a geek. Carnies always needed geeks. Mike had geeked before and knew it was a dependable way to keep the stuff flowing in.

Finding Peggy had been a piece of luck neither expected nor unexpected. She was in her early thirties, a little hard-looking, and in need. You found them that way sometimes; women who responded only to a cer-

tain lure; to the subtle animal magnetism certain men have, and Peggy's type never asked for decency, respectability, or ambition. She asked only for that which satisfied her.

"It's hot in that stand. Your sweat drips right on the burgers but them slobs eat 'em anyway."

After wiping deep down between her braless breasts, Peggy used the towel on Mike's bristled visage. Then she slipped out of her apron and stretched out beside him on the bunk.

"God, honey," she sighed. "I'm beat."

She had only a pair of panties on now and the smell of her was thick in the small wagon. To Mike, this was neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

She lay with her eyes closed for a time and he watched her lean belly rise and fall with her breathing. Sweat was again forming. It was heavy on her upper lip and the rest of her face was shiny.

"Honey, maybe you could clean up tonight and we'll maybe go somewhere, huh?"

"Where the hell is there to go in a stinking backwater like this?"

"There's a place out on the highway that stays open all night."

"I've got no money. You know that."

"I've got enough for both of us, honey—you know *that*."

"Aren't you afraid I'd get in a fight?" he teased.

"I wouldn't be like the last time, honest. I wouldn't even look at no other man."

"You can look at any man you please. I couldn't care less."

"Don't say that, sweetie. You make it sound like we weren't together somehow."

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His shirt was open and she pressed her cheek against his chest and her thick black hair brushed his face. He stroked it absently. In the beginning, because she was a woman, she'd tried to assert some domination over him. But she gave that up quickly when he started back to the supply wagon. She'd tried to steer him off the booze so he could straighten up and "make something of himself." But that hadn't worked either.

He was grossly unfair to her. He'd started the fight that night because he wanted to hit someone or something and for no other reason. Then, accusing her of looking at another man had served a double purpose. It gave him an excuse and flattered Peggy. For a while, it made her think he cared.

She lifted her head and found his mouth there in the reeking heat and kissed him hungrily.

"God, darling!" she whispered. "Why is it I can't ever get enough of you?"

He could have explained to her that she was a conditioned nymphomaniac, but it hardly seemed worth the effort. After the kiss, she snuggled down and closed her eyes. "I've got ten more minutes," she said. "Then I got to give Sue her break." She sighed, "God how those pigs can chomp it down," and dozed off.

Mike stirred restlessly. What the hell was it? What bothered him? Things had been all right. He'd always managed to get enough booze to keep him going and the thing here with Peggy had been dropped into his lap. So why this uneasiness?

Peggy stirred. The ten minutes had passed but Mike made no gesture toward awakening her. Peggy owned the concession and Sue worked for her. Sue had taken the long shift before.

Peggy stirred and awoke.

"Honey," Peggy whispered thickly. "Don't ever go away. Tell me everything's all right—that you're all right, darling . . ."

"... Are you all right, Professor?"

They were crowded around his desk. Lathan Mott had taken charge. "Stand back. Give him some air. Don't keep pushing in on him."

Sonya Payne had brought a cup of water from the fountain in the hall. She was holding it to his lips.

"Are you feeling better, Professor Strong?"

"I'm quite all right now. I must have—"

"You passed out, Professor. You were talking about how things aren't as they appear and all of a sudden you—"

He was filled with a horror he had to conceal from them. He lifted a hand to his face as though to cover the filthy stubble against which Peggy had lovingly rubbed her cheek. But his jaws were clean shaven.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "This is very embarrassing."

"I can drive you home," Lathan Mott said. "I'm parked right out front."

"I'm quite all right, now," Mike said. "I'd rather walk. I think the air would do me good."

He was afraid he was going to be sick to his stomach with results even more embarrassing. He had to get away, and quickly. "Try to fill the remaining fifteen minutes profitably," he said, and went toward the door. Their eyes followed him and he felt like the world's prize fool, but there was nothing he could do about it. In fact, he was too busy trying to control his stomach to care much.

As he strode blindly along toward home he tried to blot out the horrible squawk that kept ringing in his

ears—the squawk of a rooster while its neck was being bitten through.

He wasn't thinking too clearly as he entered his apartment so going straight through and into the bathroom was purely instinctive. He stripped and set the shower as hot as he could bear and got in under the stinging spray. Nothing had ever felt quite so good. He scrubbed himself as though trying to remove a layer of skin, but even then he had to look into the mirror as he sawed a towel across his back to assure himself that he did not need a shave. He finished off by brushing his teeth and gargling with a solution that should have been diluted. But, using it straight, he got a keen satisfaction as the stuff bit painfully into his tongue.

Then he put on his robe and dropped onto the bed.

For a time, he sought to hold his mind blank; to rest it and clear it after the shock of what he'd gone through. Resolutely, he pushed thought after thought away. Then, insisting that they come in some semblance of order, he allowed them to enter.

Had it been another reality or was it—and all that had gone before—nothing but a series of savage nightmares? How could he ever know? What basis was there for judgment?

Lying there with his eyes closed, he tried to reconstruct the mental attitude of the alcoholic wreck sprawled in that pen in the carnival sideshow. He had experienced it less than an hour before, using the rational time standards of this plane. Yet the splinter existence of that Mike Strong was totally alien to him.

It could not have been Mike Strong or any phase of him. Nothing in Mike Strong's makeup as a human consciousness had such weaknesses in it. No crux decision

he could possibly have made at any time in his life could have led to such depths.

Even though he did not believe this it was somehow a reassurance; one he had not needed after returning from his other splinter lives. They had been confusing, upsetting, but there had been nothing about them that had caused him to turn his face away in horror. He had felt an affinity with those Mike Strongs. Only into this new sojourn had the element of horror entered. Thus, as was no doubt perfectly natural, he disowned the newest Mike Strong. Then, after doing so, he found it not too revolting to try and recapture the personality of the unfortunate wreck.

Lying there in the clean world of his prime existence, he visualized the sweating, odorous body of Peggy stretched by his side. Idealized in fantasy, it was not so bad, and he tended to gloss over the rank smell of gin and sweat and greasy hamburgers. :

Perhaps a woman like that could attract a decadent Mike Strong—if such a Mike Strong could exist.

But the sojourn and the return had highlighted a danger that now came foremost into his mind. There was definitely a carryover from the splinter lives that could destroy him in this one. He'd come back from the first one with bruised knuckles. There had been a certain emotional upset after the devastated world of the atom war, but no true physical reaction.

This time, however, he'd been ripped both emotionally and physically. If nothing more this last experience clearly proved that he used the same body in all the splinter lives. Completely in the dark as to the fantastic material processes involved, he had no way of foretelling the exact physical carryovers; why, after slugging Solonoff he'd come away with a bruised fist, and yet

had not brought the latest Mike Strong's filthy, stubbled jowls back with him.

That was somewhat of a comfort. But the big question remained. Would death in one of the splinter lives put an end to his total existence? If so, by what process would he die here? Suppose, in some splinter life they shot him to death? He certainly would not be found in this life with a skullful of mysterious bullets.

The pondering wearied him and he drifted off to sleep . . .

When he opened his eyes again, it was to look groggily up into the face of Paul Bender. Bender was standing beside his bed.

"Well, it's about time," Bender said.

Mike struggled back to consciousness. "How did you get here?"

"I came in through a window."

"You might have tried ringing the bell."

"I did. And the phone."

"I was just taking forty winks. I was planning to call you."

"That was yesterday."

"I beg your pardon—"

"The attack you had in your classroom was yesterday. This is four o'clock the next day. You slept straight through?"

Mike sat up and put his feet on the floor. "If I did, it's something new. I've never slept this long before in my life."

"Sleeping tablets?"

"I've never taken an opiate, either."

"You had another one?"

Mike nodded. "And it was a lulu. I—it made me sick."

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

"Things aren't so good here, either. Your class has been sounding off. You're the talk of the campus."

"But they couldn't know—"

"The Dean wants to see you."

"What for?"

"You'd better dress and go and find out. I'll be home when he's through with you. Drop around."

"I wonder what happened when I had the lapse. I was there in front of the whole class. Do you suppose I talked? Do you think I made an idiot of myself?"

Paul Bender paused to stare at his friend. His face showed him to be without anger, but still, there was something there. Mike Strong sensed his friend's reaction moreso than having seen it. It was disappointment, regret, a sadness.

"You put great store in how people see you, Mike."

"Isn't that natural?" Mike grumbled.

"Yes, I suppose so. But is it important?"

"I don't understand you," Mike said slowly. "I don't understand you at all . . ."

9

DEAN SPENCER had been the reason for the success of Kane College. More a business man than an educator, he defended his methods by telling his critics a college had to be promoted just like any other enterprise; that it was his hard business head that provided the institution wherein the academic mind could flourish. And his argument, not without merit, had silenced most of those who had accused him of commercialism.

He was a small, fat, bouncy little man with tremendous energy and seldom stayed behind his desk during an interview. Mike found him with one foot up on a windowsill looking out over the campus. In a chair beside his desk, sat Vincent Wonderly, the vague-eyed, venerable head of Kane's philosophy department. Wonderly, like Paul Bender, also had a public stature which rated newspaper copy from time to time. His books were highly respected for the warm, homey touch he

put to philosophy. Nasty little jibes, unpleasant appellations such as, the Poor Man's Plato, that were occasionally hurled by those who saw his works as shallow had not greatly damaged his reputation.

As Mike entered Dean Spencer's office, his eye fell upon Wonderly first and an eminent critic's comment flashed through his mind: "Wonderly's perceptive conclusion—'Philosophy is God, God is philosophy,' solves everything so simply, it is difficult to understand why any of us bother to delve deeper."

Wonderly's mild old eyes were troubled. "I don't know, William—I just don't know—"

"Well I do," Spencer replied grimly and then turned and saw Mike.

"Come in, young man. We have a couple of points to thresh out."

Mike did not answer. He took the chair Spencer brusquely indicated, and sat silent.

The silence did not last long. Spencer pointed an accusing finger. "Just what are you trying to do to Kane—start a scandal?"

"I don't understand."

Wonderly raised a gentle hand. "William—not so abruptly." He turned to Mike. "You do not look well, son. Are you ill?"

"I'm quite all right."

"What Dean Spencer refers to are the rumors flying about the campus that you advocate free love among the students."

"That I—*what?*"

Wonderly smiled at the grim dean. "I told you he would be completely mystified."

"Well, let's get to the bottom of it—Strong, did you

tell your class that the things of flesh and sensuality are more important than things of the spirit?"

"The next hour or so will tell the story. But I don't think she'll make it."

The words came so clearly that Mike blinked. Neither Spencer nor Wonderly had spoken them—yet someone had.

Wonderly's eyes were back on Mike. "Son, you *are* ill."

"I'm quite all right, honestly."

"Oh, stop pampering him," Spencer snapped. "Answer my question."

"I said no such thing."

"Then what did you say?"

"What about Wingate? What are we going to do with him?"

The voice from nowhere was familiar. Yet it was not. Mike passed a hand across his forehead. Wonderly is right, he thought. I am ill. Not only that—I've gone mad.

"Well—" Spencer demanded.

"I said—I said—frankly, I don't quite remember."

"Don't you see, William?" Wonderly suggested quietly. "There is nothing whatever behind the rumors. Such things start. They die down just as quickly."

"But don't you see what rumors like that can do to Kane?"

Mike waved a hand, his face a mask of intense concentration. "Wait a minute—now wait. Maybe I did say something—in class—"

"Well, come on, man! Don't you remember what you tell your students?"

"What can we do? We gave him the gun. After all, these are not normal times." That voice—so familiar—yet—

"I—I was expanding upon a theory. It had to do with the material plane as against the spiritual plane. I believe I used the word sensations when speaking of the five senses. It may have been mistranslated into *sensuality*."

"It doesn't really matter what you said," Spencer replied. "You goofed. That's the important thing. Right this minute I'm trying for a grant to build a new football stadium. The man with the money believes in good old Christian principals—"

"William, let me talk to him. Let me find out about this. I told you it would be better if I'd talked to him first."

"What do you want me to do? Pat him on the head and—?"

"Why don't you leave us alone for a few minutes. You've confused him."

Mike sprang to his feet. "What's going on here? I'm no child!"

"Just five minutes, William—"

The angry dean growled and strode from the room. Wonderly watched the door close. Then he smiled at Mike. "Let's not waste our strength in emotional bursts, son. Sit down. Talk to me. I'm interested in that theory of yours."

Mike dropped back into his chair. "I'm sorry—Professor Wonderly—"

"You have a very close relationship with Paul Bender, don't you?"

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

"On the contrary. You're very fortunate. He has one of the keenest minds in the world."

"So far, I haven't seen much evidence of it."

"Wise men are sometimes prone to receive rather than

give. Perhaps you have something that has helped him."

"Sometimes I think he's amusing himself with me."

"I think that hardly likely. I believe it probable, however, that your association with him has stimulated your mind to a point where you are working in broader concepts."

"Do you consider that bad?"

"Son, don't be so hostile. Of course I don't. But there are elements of safety and danger to be considered."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Before we expound as teachers, we must judge whether or not our pupils are ready to function mentally in the areas we open to them."

"That goes without saying."

"True, but do we always keep it in mind?"

"I suppose miscalculations are possible."

"Tell me about your theory."

"It really isn't a clear cut theory. I'll admit I was wrong in bringing it up. Not so much because of the class's inability to grasp but because I hardly knew what I was talking about."

"Very well, we won't go into it. Now, I want you to go home and rest. I'll handle Dean Spencer."

"He seemed pretty angry."

"He was, but I have an advantage over him I sometimes use. Certain of us here at Kane are what he considers attractive images. This gives us some leeway to use our weight. There will be no further trouble from Dean Spencer."

"Thank you, Professor Wonderly."

The deceptively simple philosopher's eyes were as keen as those of Paul Bender. They studied Mike.

"There is something bothering you greatly, isn't there, son?"

"I'm experiencing a little confusion. But I'll work it out."

"I'm sure you will. But may I suggest a form of aid that's getting scant backing in these days of high science?"

"I'd be grateful."

"Prayer. I rely on it frequently . . ."

The voices from nowhere had ceased. Alone again, Mike seated himself on a campus bench and thought about them. There had been two—one of them irritatingly familiar. The other one also, though strange, had a timber and quality to it that made Mike feel he should have been able to identify it by location.

He pondered the problem, but found his mind going back to Vincent Wonderly. In his previous contacts with the philosopher, Mike felt—with some shame now—that he had allowed a certain lack of regard to influence him. He'd seen the man as too simple and had considered this a mark of superficiality. Now, he regretted that; not necessarily because Wonderly had been sympathetic, but rather because this was the first time Mike had paid him any real attention. And he had come up with an entirely new impression. The gentle image had not changed. It was still the same. But Mike now saw Wonderly's simplicity as akin to that of the calm surface of very deep water.

Prayer—Prayer . . .

"What is your scientific explanation of prayer, Paul? A manifestation of deep-seated superstitions? A reflection of man's fear of the unknown?"

"Hmmm. Aren't we being cynical today? What makes you bring that up?"

"Vincent Wonderly advocates it."

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

It occurred to Mike that he and Bender had never discussed Wonderly and he watched his friend for reaction.

"Wonderly is broadly accepted."

"By the common man."

"And what's wrong with the common man?" Bender asked.

"Are you springing to his defense?"

"I never thought he needed defending."

"Is that why you've never been his companion?"

"Not so fast. What is this?"

Bender was surprised rather than angered.

"It doesn't matter. I asked your opinion about prayer."

"Scientific? Mystical? Personal? You'll have to be more specific."

"All right. Scientific."

"I'm in favor of it."

"That's a personal opinion."

"What other kind is there? But as to the scientific aspect, I think perhaps its value depends on the way it's used."

"You don't believe in simple supplication?"

"That's in the mystical area. I'd just as soon let it alone. You can't get around the fact, however, that a positively directed prayer positively charges the mind and concentrates it upon the objective involved. To illustrate, I could see a man praying for money to pay his mortgage and thus inspiring himself to a point where he could go out and earn it."

"Do you think that's what happens in cases where results are attributed to prayer?"

"In some cases—yes."

"Never a gift from God?"

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

"I think maybe Vincent Wonderly would claim all things are gifts from God. But what difference does it make if the results are achieved?"

Mike appeared to be listening to Bender's answers with only a part of his mind and Bender could have been excused for wondering where the other part was. He was not ready to inquire, however.

"I imagine," Mike said, "that scientists seldom believe in God."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's said that familiarity breeds contempt and I think it's true. The scientist delves in and becomes closely acquainted with workings that, to ordinary people are things of awe and wonder. He strips away the mystery that nourishes the layman's belief in God."

"You don't actually believe that," Bender said quietly.

"Isn't it logical?"

"The exact opposite is far more logical. The scientist who watches the exact performances of the atom has to stand in awe of the laws that are based only on the authority of God—Infinite Power—Almighty Will—call It what you must. Scientific investigation has to be a path to every broadening faith in the Supreme Being."

"Then it could follow that there is nothing—absolutely nothing—which a man has any intelligent right to fear except his own ignorance."

"He doesn't even have a right to fear that if he sees it as something that will pass."

Mike fell into silence and Bender respected it. They sat for quite a while before Bender said, "I gather that Wonderly impressed you."

"Yes. A great deal. But there's something else. I've begun to hear voices."

"Speaking to you?"

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

"No. The voices of people speaking to each other; snatches of conversation from nowhere."

"Do they make sense?"

"They're sane enough. Not idiotic babblings. But they make no sense to me."

"Is there any reason why they should?"

"Perhaps not. Still, I feel that they should. There's something familiar about them."

"I wish I could be of more help to you, Mike. But I'm completely frank in admitting that what you're going through is beyond my depth."

"You've been a great deal of help. If I didn't have you to talk to, I'm afraid I'd go mad. This weird, frightening progression I'm going through—"

"You're going through more than one progression, Paul. This interplane thing, and one right here in your prime life."

"I'm getting edgy, nervous. My nerves are like tight violin strings."

"That's symptomatic, of course. I was referring to something a little different. I've yet to meet a man however strong and self-sufficient who, when loaded with more than he could carry, did not turn to God."

Mike smiled. "We're getting a little maudlin, aren't we?"

"Are we?"

Mike came quickly to his feet. "Thanks for the talk," he said. "Maybe I'll be back later."

"Any time. Day or night . . ."

Mike walked. He circled the campus and recircled it. He strode across it and back again.

He knew now where the voices had come from and had pondered whatever block it had been that had kept

him from recognizing them instantly. Some confusion. Some weariness of mind.

But it didn't really matter now that he knew.

He turned in at his apartment when he approached it for the fourth time and stood for a long time in the dark looking out the window.

Then he went into his bedroom and dropped to his knees beside the bed. He prayed aloud. His voice a whisper:

"Dear God. Help me. Let me go to her before she dies. Let me see her again." And there was something so very simple—far more simple than even that which he had seen in Vincent Wonderly; a return from the proud knowledges of manhood to the blind faith of a child as he explained:

"Her name is Greta Rood. I'm in love with her and I want to be near her and only You know where she is. Only You can take me there."

He prayed for quite a while and then went into the living room and sat down in a chair and waited . . .

10

"MAYBE God was busy."

The observation, spoken wryly by Mike Strong, brought a quick glance from Gabe Welch.

"Why did you say that?"

Mike returned the glance, his expression puzzled. "I'm darned if I know. I must have had some reason."

Mike turned away to put the last of the wood on the fire that kept the sub-zero temperatures from stiffening them both into corpses. Outside, the wind howled its fury at not being quite able to demolish the leanto Mike had fashioned from material salvaged from the smashed plane. Staying in the plane after the crash had been impractical. There was no space left inside. They'd bailed out at the last moment, Gabe's broken leg resulting therefrom.

Then there had been the laborious crosscountry crawl

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

to the wreckage with the storm forming and hitting them with half a mile still to go.

But they'd made it and now had no problems other than Gabe's multiply fractured leg, a shortage of food, and as savage a storm as had ever hit the Canadian Rockies.

"I'm going to have to forage for more wood," Mike said.

Gabe Welch, his face pinched by far too much pain, looked at his bundled leg and tried to grin. "There's always the splints if you can't find anymore."

"Plenty of wood around," Mike said cheerfully. "We'll do fine." He turned from the fire to Gabe and asked, "Would you like to move? Maybe we can work you into a more comfortable position."

"It's okay. You'll have to hurry. It'll be dark soon."

Mike pushed out under the flap he'd fashioned across the leanto and went out into the blast. The frigid wind, even against the emergency flying suit he'd salvaged from the wreck was a sharp physical shock.

The wreckage of the big cargo freighter had been strewn over half a mile. There had been quite a little kindling wood from the smashed crates, but it was already covered by whipping snow and sleet and the easiest wood to get was from the trees ripped and broken by the plane.

Mike pushed forward, slantwise to the gale, and as he went, he wondered about that observation concerning God. It had been a natural enough thing to say, but what bothered him was a nagging feeling that he'd meant something entirely different. It was as though some very vital thing—something ultra important—had been in his mind at that moment and had then vanished; something that desperately needed remembering. His

big irritation of course was at his own inefficiency for not being able to recall. But at least it couldn't have been anything affecting their present perilous position. This whole mess was self-apparent.

God had been busy. The idea seemed to tie in with something of vast importance and Mike had a feeling that time was slipping away. It was one of the most aggravating feelings he'd ever had. As he dug through the snow drifts in search of fuel, he cursed the day he'd flipped a coin and thus decided his future after the war—to stay in the air. His old job had been waiting and by this time he could have been lolling in a soft academic assignment at any of half a dozen colleges—pouring history into the skulls of the repulsive young. A nice deal. But he'd sought adventure and the big payoff and thrown in with some crazy characters who'd channeled their flying experience into the shaping of an air freight line. So here he was—down somewhere in the Canadian rockies in a situation just chockful of adventure and excitement but not much else.

His arms full of wood, he started back, wishing they'd been hauling something edible to Japan rather than machine parts to be processed in their low-wage factories over there.

Was he feeling sorry for himself? He pondered this as the storm heightened and he struggled back toward the leanto. And he made his decision quickly. No. He was just plain scared. But oddly, not of death. The feeling that emerged from this mental struggle was weird; something like claustrophobia. He was trapped here in this wild, open country. He had to get out of it or he'd smother. Vital things depended on his surviving; something great and glittering and wonderful. But what? What was so great and glittering and wonderful about

what he'd been doing? With the novelty of running cargos all over the world wearing thin, this had become just another job. The thing he had restlessly sought all his life had eluded him consistently. And now, with the odds on life coming up very short, he felt that somehow that mystic goal had been closer than ever.

But such thinking was silly. It was probably nothing more than comparison of what he'd had with what he was now faced with.

He reentered the leanto and anchored the crate cover they were using for a door.

"Sounds like it's getting rougher," Gabe said.

"Reaching its peak I guess. It ought to start fading before long."

"She's sure a howler."

"How's the leg?"

"Okay."

"Don't give me that. How does it really feel?"

"It doesn't really hurt much. I can feel it trying to swell, though. It's bending the splits. And it's so darned hot we won't need the fire pretty soon."

Mike got a helmetful of snow and was holding it over the fire.

"You can drink this and then try to get some sleep."

"Uh-uh," Gabe said. "Couldn't possibly sleep."

So, with Gabe made as comfortable as possible, Mike hunted for things to talk about.

"As soon as the storm breaks, they'll come after us."

"They don't know where we are."

"They'll find us."

"How long were we off course before we crashed?"

"About an hour I guess—after the radio went dead."

"This is big country," Gabe said. "And rough."

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

They were both aware of the odds against them so they quit talking about it. After twisting around restlessly for a while, Gabe said, "The damn misery of this thing is thinking of Lorry."

"Lorry?"

"My wife."

Mike's lack of knowledge concerning Gabe was logical because they'd been thrown together only recently. Gabe Welch was a newcomer to Global Air Freight and had been on the South American run.

"Her name is Lorry?"

"Short for Lawrence. Her father was a kook. Wanted a boy."

Lorry. The name was too familiar. It was as though, when Gabe mentioned her name, that Mike knew all about her. A cute little brunette with bee-stung lips and very serious ideas about love and marriage. Yet he was certain that he'd never met a girl named Lorry in his life.

"Any kids?"

"Not yet. One's due in three months."

"Don't worry. You'll be stumping around the hospital waiting room on a cane."

"All alone there suffering," Gabe said. "She didn't want me to get into this racket. I had a nice thing in a swivel chair after the war."

"Why didn't you keep it?"

"Because I'm an idiot. I wanted the big blue. Trapped, you know. Besides, the job was with her father."

Mike handed him the helmet again and he drank deeply. "You're not married?"

"Nope. Nobody waiting."

"You're lucky."

"I guess so—in that respect."

"Listen to that wind."

"It's got to blow out."

Gabe's eye grew vague. "She's a real devout little witch. She'll be praying like crazy."

"What about you?"

"I was never very hot for the sermon and pulpit bit."

"Agnostic?"

"No, just lazy."

"Well, don't worry. I'm going to get you out of here."

"Sure."

"I mean it."

Gabe closed his eyes and Mike sat there staring into the fire. He was struck by the sheer urgency of that last thought; getting Gabe to safety. It was a must. It just had to be. And he definitely knew—even without pondering the point—that it was Gabe's life that was important, not his own. Yet he hardly knew the man. It was natural, of course, that as the able-bodied member of the team, he do his very best. Deserting Gabe for his own safety did not even occur to him so there were now comparatives to wrestle with.

But it was not the logical mental progressions that preoccupied Mike. It was something far more vital; an almost fanatical compulsion to save Gabe Welch.

This, he examined closely. Was it merely a good, working evasion whereby he did not have to admit his own desperate urge for survival but could still serve it well?

He didn't think so. He wanted to live, of course, but not to the point of deserting another man through an act of cowardice. So there was no need to buttress himself against the possibility of doing something he'd be ashamed of.

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

Another thing that bothered was the unfamiliarity of this "deep think" role. He wasn't the type; or at least, he never had been. So it was something entirely new. Thus, he floundered about miserably. Of that, he was certain.

Gabe had dozed off but now he stirred. "That so and so wind!" he muttered.

"Don't worry. Everything is going to be all right . . ."

". . . I don't quite see how you figure that," Markham said.

Mike hated Markham. He was a stuffed-shirt, but he was Big Frank's attorney and he was feared in the courtroom.

"How I figure what?"

"That everything is going to be all right. Can't I impress upon you that fact that you'd better run scared? You're in for murder and you're going to be tried and you may go to the chair."

Mike wasn't aware that he'd said everything would be all right, but he didn't argue the point. He did try to look on the good side, however.

"Those bums invaded my home!"

"They had a search warrant. They were the law."

"They didn't show one. They just flashed a paper and pushed in."

"I might be able to establish some doubt in that area if it weren't for the girl. That's where you played the fool-taking up with that little plant."

He wished Markham wouldn't keep bringing Lorry up. It hurt too darned much. Not that he wouldn't have loved to strangle her with his own two hands. He wouldn't have minded going to the chair for paying that little witch off. What made him writhe was being

played for a sucker. A D.A. plant right in his own room.

"Big Frank should have gotten a line on her."

"Don't try to push your own stupidity off on somebody else," Markham said coldly. "You're a big boy. She took you—not Frank."

"But you ought to be able to cut her to pieces on the stand. A cheap little tramp like that—"

"I doubt if she'll be put on the stand. They won't need her. And I'm certainly not going to call her. The point is, you would never have been raided if you hadn't let her find out about your whole operation."

"But Big Frank's got connections—"

"There are two points in this situation you'd better get firmly set in your mind. One: the lid has been ripped off. To coin a phrase, the reformers are up in arms. There's a big cleanup movement afoot and this is the time to hunt a hole and stay in it until the excitement dies down. You pulled your trigger at a very bad time."

"What's the other point?"

"One you aren't aware of. Big Frank's girl put a finger on you. Frank had his suspicions, it seems, and he grilled her and she told him a pretty good story. Frank is a somewhat moral man after his fashion. He has only one woman at a time and expects the same kind of fidelity. Fay was doing a little extracurricular playing, or so Frank believed. She convinced him, however, that the extent of her two-timing was fighting you off."

"Why, the lying tramp! It was the other way! I practically had to kick her in the teeth! Do you believe—"

Markham held up a defensive hand. "Please don't lean on me."

"But the absolute truth—"

"Truth means nothing. It never does. It's what people

believe that counts. But Big Frank is still playing fair."

"Sure! Throwing me to the wolves."

"On the contrary. I've been instructed to give you the best possible defense of which I'm capable."

"And in return I'm supposed to not blow the whistle on him and his organization."

"You couldn't possibly do that. The D.A. is interested in frying you, my friend, and nothing else. He doesn't want to stir up a hornets' nest."

"I could do a lot of talking."

"Certainly. But no one would listen. Has the D.A. asked you for any information outside the scope of your indictment?"

"No."

"But still, as I said, Big Frank is being fair. I've been told to get you the best possible."

"Do you think you can keep me out of the chair?"

"All I can say is that no one has been electrocuted in this state for three years. But you could be the exception."

"That puts the odds in my favor, at least."

"Maybe I can get enough delays to outwait them. If we could hold over until the indignation dies down I might be able to get you a life sentence."

"Then there would be a chance for maybe even a pardon when politics get right again."

"It's possible."

"Then try to stall them until—"

"—the wind stops blowing."

Gabe stirred and opened his eyes. "What'd you say? The wind—?"

"No—nothing. Go back to sleep."

Gabe closed his feverish eyes and Mike sat there,

shaken. His nerves were tense and screaming. His stomach was tied in a knot. What had happened? Had he been asleep?

He thought not although he had no other explanation for what seemed like the shattered fragments of a nightmare that spun as in a dark whirlpool just below the surface of his subconscious.

It was a frightening feeling; almost terror-charged; as though his world had been suddenly torn from its mooring and was hurtling end over end through space. No stability; no anchor to cling to; no roots to hold him to the earth of life itself.

Then the shock faded somewhat and his nerves steadied while old memories seemed to be trying frantically to come within the focus of his consciousness.

"I guess I'm not built for crisis," he muttered.

Still, he'd done well in the war. He'd faced crisis there as a lieutenant with his men under fire and had done pretty well.

Then the other thing came back—the compulsive demand for success here—of getting Gabe out. And to handle it, he was going to have to quit worrying about himself. To hell with the wild ideas and reactions that kept kiting through his mind. Concentrate on what was happening now. Something had to be done.

They had to get moving.

On the surface, this seemed idiotic; a sure way to die quicker. But Mike didn't question it. He had to get Gabe on the move.

"Okay, buddy," he said. "Siesta's over. We're hiking out of here."

Gabe came awake. "Is the storm over?"

"It's lessening," Mike lied cheerfully as the wind and

sleet howled outside. "We'll start moving right away and get the drop on it."

That probably would have meant nothing to Gabe even he'd been in shape to question it, which he was not. "Okay," he said. "Pull me up."

Mike got him outside the leanto and helped him hold his balance against the wind. "Put your arm over my shoulder and just use your outside leg. We'll walk away from the wind."

They started out but the going was understandably hard. At times they had to stop and brace themselves against a sudden upsurge in the ferocity of the blast.

They struggled along in silence for a while. Then Gabe gasped, "I don't think I can make it, Mike. I'm mighty tired. You keep going. Come back after me—"

He slumped.

"Wake up, Gabe! Come on! For Christ sake! Get a little starch into you. Don't quit like a sick dog."

He slapped Gabe's face in an attempt to jar him out of the pleasant lethargy that always precedes death by freezing.

"Leave me alone, you idiot," Gabe snarled. "I gotta get some sleep."

"Snap out of it. Come on! If I have to, I'll get behind you and kick you through the drifts."

"You and what army?"

Gabe pulled back and swung a feeble fist. The movement sent him to the ground. He raised his fist again. It dropped and he lay still. He was out.

Mike knelt beside him and hauled him up onto his back. Locking Gabe's arms on his chest, Mike staggered to his feet and moved forward.

"Gotta keep moving—gotta keep moving—"

He staggered forward, each step a calculated effort.

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

He shook his head to clear it and drove his teeth into his lower lip to produce a pain he could cling to. But there was no pain. It was like biting into dead meat.

He staggered on, every shred of consciousness—every fiber of flesh—concentrated on moving forward.

Suddenly the storm bloomed up into a thing of heightened fury. It was impossible to even keep his lids slitted against it. He closed them and staggered on.

What he hit was solid. A boulder, a big tree, a wall.

It *was* a wall. Mike opened his eyes and saw the horizontal logs, one the other with mud in between. A cabin!

Filled with sudden energy, he rounded the closest corner and saw the door. He dropped Gabe on the threshold, found the latch and pushed the door open. He pulled Gabe inside and managed to close the door before he fell across his unconscious companion.

He lay there for a few moments, allowing himself the luxury of rest, and those few moments brought him an elation such as he'd never known; an elation so great he had to question it.

Why? The sheer satisfaction in having done the impossible? The joy that comes when certain death is suddenly turned into the promise of life?

Perhaps these triumphs were enough, but there was even more. Something inside him that refused to take understandable form was charged with a supreme happiness.

I have shown myself to be worthy.

What the hell did that mean?

Mike scowled in anger at his meandering mind and came to his feet. It was a nice place to land in a storm. There was fuel and a fireplace and food left on shelves for the next man who came.

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

"Come on, buddy boy," Mike said. "The worst is over. It's downhill from here. Let's get you into that bunk and then I'll build a fire and we'll start living again..."

II

"THE FACT that this is not a known form of madness makes no difference," Mike said. "It is madness. It's a disintegration. I'm in a world of no fixed form—no solidity. Life can throw me anywhere it chooses. I can't take much more of it."

Paul Bender looked at his friend with compassion. "Things have changed?"

"They've gotten worse. It's come to a point where my awareness now jumps from one splinter life to another without even coming back here for a rest. Living has become a maze for me—a guessing game. I don't know where I'll be from one moment to the next."

When Mike hadn't turned up at Bender's home, Bender had come searching and found Mike sitting alone in his darkened living room. Mike ignored the bell until Bender had pounded on the door and insisted on being admitted.

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

"I have an idea," Bender said.

"I don't think there's anything that can be done. It's come to a point where I don't seem to belong anywhere. This may be my prime life but I long for a different one—one I can't get back to."

"Suppose we try hypnotism?"

"To what end? What good would it do?"

"Perhaps if we wiped all vestige of your other lives from your memory, the whole phenomenon might end."

"What reason do you have for thinking so?"

"None that has any scientific support, but at least it's an effort to combat the thing and I don't see where it can do any harm."

"I suppose I'd be no worse off if it didn't work."

"I'm sure you wouldn't."

"I didn't know you were a hypnotist".

"One of the sidelines I picked up along the way."

"Maybe I wouldn't be a good subject."

"Maybe not. Let's find out. Just sit where you are and relax. It shouldn't be difficult because you appear to be very tired."

"I haven't slept very well."

"Then just relax and listen to my voice. Just sit there and feel your eyelids getting heavier and heavier. They are getting heavier. You can't keep your eyes open . . . That's it. Don't fight it. Relax . . . Loosen every muscle . . . Now a sense of complete well-being is coming over you . . . You're drifting down into a deeper, deeper sleep . . . I'm going to count ten. As I count, you will go deeper into sleep . . . One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Mike heard Bender's voice as though it were receding. He tried to recall why this was being done—what his trouble had been—but it didn't seem important anymore.

He felt comfortable, relaxed, and completely rested and he wondered why this should be. A feeling of guilt touched him. He did not deserve this. He had not worked for it. He had not earned it. And as this thought came, the sense of well-being vanished and he was frightened.

But he was a man in a trap. He could not move. He could not get away from whatever place this was.

He tried to call out but no words would come. Great invisible weights were pressing down on him. He was smothering. The world was a great swirling fog around him and then he heard Bender's voice again.

"You are fighting me. Don't struggle . . . Don't be afraid . . . There is nothing to be afraid of."

The fog pitched and heaved in chaos. Then it parted and he saw a face. He reached out toward it even as he knew his arms did not move.

"Greta—help me—save me—"

The face vanished into the fog.

"Can you hear me?" Bender's voice; Bender calling through the mist.

"I can hear you."

"Lift your right hand with your arm extended."

"Why?"

"Do as I say. Do as I order."

"Why should I do as you say?"

"Stop fighting me."

"Why shouldn't I fight you?"

"I will count to ten backward. When I reach one, you will be completely awake."

"You're giving up? Everybody gives up. Nobody has any answers. That's very funny."

"I will start to count. Don't fight me. Obey me. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . You are awakening. The sleep

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

is dropping away . . . seven . . . six . . . five . . .
You are now awake . . . your eyes are opening . . .
four . . . three . . . two . . . *one* . . . open your eyes . . .”

“No . . .”

Mike was walking through a dark tunnel; all the fog was gone now and there was only pitch blackness and narrow walls on either side of him. He heard Bender's voice.

“Mike. Come back! Obey me! Come back!”

“No. I must go on.”

There was a great fear in him but a sense also of high elation. He had defied Bender and won. That meant he was not as weak as he'd begun to see himself. He was stronger than Bender who was very strong indeed.

To some extent, this offset the fear of where he was and what lay ahead.

“Come back, Mike! Come back!”

But Bender's voice was only faintly audible from far back in the dark tunnel. It had weakened and had no strength at all.

Mike moved on. It seemed that a wall lay just ahead; that he would walk into it at any moment. But the wall kept receding, kept moving back at each forward step he took.

Was there an end to this tunnel? Would he come out into the light or would he go endlessly on through darkness for all eternity?

*Who am I? What am I? From whence did I come?
Where am I going?*

It was as though some one else asked those questions through his mind—using it as a mocking instrument—some goading censor he'd spent an eternity trying to evade.

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

Far ahead, now, he could see the mouth of the tunnel; a pinpoint of light that grew larger as he hurried on.

He came out into the sunshine.

There was a broad countryside spread out before him with a river in the distance. On the banks of the river he could see buildings with walks and arbors; stately places owned obviously by people of great wealth.

This was not a land he had ever seen before; of that he was sure; it was all new and strange. But that was not as surprising as another strange truth; that he himself was new and strange.

It was as though he were two people; one who had come as a stranger and another who was not a stranger and accepted all this calmly.

The second person viewed the long avenue of crucified men stretching off toward the river and saw nothing extraordinary in it; this even as the other part of him was horrified.

There were too many of them to count—men nailed to crosses, facing each other on either side of the long avenue. He walked toward them and in reaching the avenue he had to pass two crouched figures who looked up at him. One still had eyes and could see and stretched out a hand seeking alms and pity. The other one had only sockets from which the eyes had been eaten by leprosy.

Mike passed them, ignoring the begger's chant that the blind one intoned endlessly.

He moved down toward the crucified men and looked up at the first one, a great, muscular ox of a man with eyes dazed from the agony that death had not yet relieved. Spikes had been driven through his palms and there was a puddle of blood on the ground beneath each hand but the blood had stopped flowing. It had dried in

the trunk of the cross where it had flowed from the wounds in the feet.

A boy sat on the far side of the avenue beneath the cross fourth down from the beginning of the two lines and Mike went to the boy. He sat quietly, without tears, no longer looking up at the dark giant who hung above him.

Mike waved a hand. "Who are these men?"

"They are Goths who came to destroy Rome."

Looking upward, Mike said, "He is not a Goth. He is a negro."

"A slave. As the Goths came south and were strong, some of the slaves broke away and joined them. Then the legions of Tiberius overcame them and these were left alive to be crucified."

The boy spoke quietly, with neither outward sorrow nor any elation at the downfall of the invaders.

"Why are you here?" Mike asked.

"I was with him," the boy said, gesturing toward the dying negro. "He was good to me. He took care of me so I came with him."

"Why do you stay? You can do him no good."

"I must wait until he is dead before I leave him."

"Where will you go then?"

"I do not know. To some city where I can find food."

"Would you like to go with me?"

"No. He will live for some hours yet. I must stay."

As Mike walked on, the boy set his eyes on the horizon and seemed to forget he'd been spoken to.

Most of the crucified men had been deserted. There was no one to wait beneath the crosses of the blonde northerners. But faithful women knelt here and there at the bloody feet of the dark-haired ones who had joined in the revolt.

Then, ahead along the avenue, Mike saw a blonde figure at the foot of one of the crosses. She was not like the other women. She was large of frame and body and even now she held herself with a dignity none of the others possessed.

Mike approached her and stopped beside her. "You came with the invaders?"

"Yes."

He looked up at the cross where the man hung limp. He had great thick muscles on his arms and the legs pinioned by the spike through his feet were like the trunks of young trees.

"Your husband?"

"My brother."

"Women rarely come down with the men from the north."

"I stood by his side. I fought."

"They let you live."

"After we were taken I was forced to crawl with their dogs. But they tired of me."

"What will you do?"

"I will stay with him. He will die at sunset. Then I will go."

"You look familiar to me. I have seen you before."

"Did you fight with—*them*?" She spat the last word contemptuously.

"No."

"Where do you come from?"

"It does not matter. But I have seen you before. I swear it. I should know your name."

"I am nameless now. I shall always be nameless."

"I will wait," Mike said suddenly. "When you can leave you must come with me."

"No."

"I will care for you."

"No!"

"What will you do when you leave here?"

"I will go to a place called Judea. There have been rumors of a man there. I would like to hear him speak."

"I have heard of him. He tells of a false god. You worship the northern gods?"

"I did. Now I have no gods."

"This Galilean you speak of. He is an agitator against Rome. They will kill him."

"I would like to hear him speak."

"But you and I—we have come together. We should not part."

"Why? What am I to you? And what are you to me?"

"I don't know."

"I only wish to be left alone."

"But why is it that I have no wish to go?"

"That is your own affair."

"I would like to tell you what is in my heart."

"I do not care what is in your heart. It is as black as your hair."

She angered him. He seized her by the shoulders and shook her. "Why are you so dense of mind? Why do you not listen to me?"

Her eyes mocked him. "Why do you not kill me? I am defenseless. You could destroy me easily."

"I do not wish to destroy you. I wish to love and cherish you!"

"You are mad!"

He released her. He looked up at the Nordic warrior who had found defeat in a land as savage as his own. "Why did you move on Rome?" he asked the girl. "No one defeats the Romans. Why did your brother come so far from home to die?"

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"With only a few more of us we could have defeated your Roman legions. They have gone soft. They overcame us by numbers alone. Your Rome is dying—sinking down in its own rottenness. It does not have long to live."

"I am not of Rome."

"Then who are you? Where are you from?"

"I don't know. There is something strange. I do not belong to all this and none of it belongs to me." He paused to look at her. "Only you are real. Only you and I are reality in this whole bloody nightmare."

"You talk like one possessed."

"I speak what I do not understand. Yet I know it is truth."

"Go away. Leave me in peace with my dying brother."

"I knew you somewhere before. I will know you again."

She sank to her knees and wiped oozing blood from the feet that were nailed to the cross.

Mike moved on . . .

12

"I'M SORRY," Paul Bender said. "It was no good. I had no control over you whatever. The experiment failed."

Mike gulped down raw scotch. "It was as strange as all hell. I don't know whether any of it was real or not. The whole thing was different—not like any of the other lapses."

Paul Bender's eyes were boring into Mike's. "There must be others like you. If we could only find another one with your gifts."

Mike laughed. "That's certainly a great way of putting it. My gift. With a padded cell my reward."

"Cut that out," Paul Bender said sharply. "You're not insane and you know it."

His annoyance surprised Mike. "I think this thing is bothering you more than it is me. I'm actually accepting it, you know. I'm looking forward eagerly to what's coming next."

"You came out of this without any physical wear and tear."

"I noticed that myself. Maybe your hypnotic suggestion about well being did work."

Bender got up from his chair. "Maybe. But why don't you try to get some sleep now? I'll go on home. If you find you want to talk later, give me a ring."

"Okay—and thanks."

"Hold the thanks until I'm able to do something for you."

Mike did not answer Bender, but the latter continued to regard his harassed friend. Then Bender's keen perception was demonstrated as he asked, "What happened?"

Mike chose this moment to be childishly evasive. His slight smile was wry, almost coy.

"What makes you think anything happened?"

"From your expression."

"It didn't change."

"Something changed. Something clarified for you."

"Yes—something clarified."

"Well—?"

"Not about my other lives. About this one."

"Tell me, man!"

"I'm not going to make it here."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll be going into a mental home before long."

"Mike—!"

"You asked me. I told you . . ."

He wanted to see Lathan Mott. And it was as though things had come to a point where his will had become law; because he had that sudden, compulsive urge even

before he left Paul Bender's house, and two minutes later, he met Lathan crossing the campus.

Mike was sure Lathan regarded him curiously, but the broad-shouldered student's voice was casual.

"Afternoon, Professor."

"Lathan. Nice to see you. Are you in a hurry?"

"No, not especially."

"Then let's sit down a while and talk."

Seated beside Lathan on a campus bench, Mike found himself at a loss. He'd been drawn to Mott but was not clear as to why. Now, he had nothing with which to open a conversation.

But Lathan Mott came to his aid. "Professor," he said, his eyes not quite meeting Mike's, "I wanted to tell you that I didn't have anything to do with all that crazy talk that got around." When Mike didn't reply, Lathan added, "Free love and all that stuff."

"Thank you, Lathan. It shocked me, but after thinking it over, I'm wondering if I didn't go too far. Maybe I gave them some grounds."

"They're mostly lame brains. They're always looking for the angle. Me—I found what you said pretty interesting."

"I'm glad."

"I didn't understand much of it, though."

"But it must have struck a chord."

"Yes, in a way. I guess, if they were willing to admit it, everybody got touched—kind of. Me—I wonder about a lot of things."

"Such as—?"

"Professor," Lathan said, now meeting Mike's eyes, "did you ever get the feeling that you've been there before?"

"I don't quite understand you."

"Well, it's like this. Every once in a while I get a weird feeling that I'm just doing a lot of things over and over again. That feeling's been coming very often lately. Like a couple of days ago, I was running a ball in scrimmage. I'd broken clear and there was no interference around me. But I knew there was because I'd made that same run in exactly the same way before and Dick Wlech was due to cut in off my left flank and bring me down. It was very weird, that sense of familiarity. It was kind of like I was two people."

"Explain that if you can."

"It's hard. Like—well, if I knew Dick was coming in on the flank it should have been easy to fade him off, but it wasn't. Like I knew but didn't know. The part of me that was running things here couldn't do anything about it. But the other part knew and just waited to get hit."

And at the risk of wearing out Lathan's overused word, Mike conceded that it was weird indeed, because he was sure this meeting had taken place before.

He had been here, on this very bench, at this exact time, talking to Lathan Mott. The incident was so clear in his memory that he knew exactly what Lathan would say next: *Does that make any sense, Professor?*

"Does that make any sense, Professor?"

It seemed to Mike that then too, he had questioned the repetition of incident in the same way he was questioning it now; that he had recalled a snatch of verse by Rossetti:

*I have been here before
But when or how, I cannot tell;
I know the grass beyond the door,*

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*The sweet, keen smell,
... the lights around the shore.*

The frustrating theory of eternal recurrence. It had plagued searching minds for centuries and out of all that thinking had come many theories: All is past and future. There is no present because it is always too fleeting to be touched. Reach for the present and it has vanished into the past. The present is but a line dividing the past from the future; a line far finer than the finest of hairs, and we balance forever on that line, blindly obeying the eternal laws of Manu.

But Mike's sense of mystic frustration was not so great now. The enigma did not awe him because he had developed a theory of his own—a mathematically exact world.

He knew of the other lives and he was sure that the key to his puzzle lay in overlapping awareness—vague or sharp, depending on the person.

"Do you think that's just silly talk, Professor?"

"No, Lathan. It's not silly at all. And there is nothing unique in it. It's a confusion that hits many people."

"But what's the answer?"

"I don't know, but I've come to one conclusion. There is a vast difference between consciousness and awareness."

"But they're words for the same thing."

"No. A cat has consciousness, but isn't aware of it. Only a human being can be aware of himself *as* a conscious entity. Can you understand that?"

"I'm not sure. But what makes no sense is that I'm not very smart. I don't get very good grades—"

"Do you mean—?"

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

"I mean I'm not intelligent enough. I shouldn't be bothered by such things."

Mike laughed. "You're far more intelligent than you know, Lathan. But the mystic sense has nothing to do with report cards. It's based on other standards. It comes to the literate and the illiterate alike."

"Maybe I'm just some kind of a kook."

Mike suddenly felt very close to Lathan; it was as though he'd known the big, blond athlete in other lives. Something forced Mike's mind into a sharp, piercing effort. But nothing came of it but the fleeting vision of a tortured figure high on a cross; a dying Nordic giant with a blonde goddess kneeling at his feet.

"Do you have a sister, Lathan?"

"Me? No. Just two brothers."

Mike used this as an opportunity to switch the conversation into less devious channels. "Are they football players too?"

"Maybe they will be. Nels is seven now, and Ivar's just a baby."

Mike got up from the bench. He would have liked to help Lathan, but he couldn't even help himself. "Come on," he said, "I'll buy you a Coke. That is, if you don't feel squeamish about being seen with the kooky professor."

"I could use a Coke," Lathan said by way of affirming his loyalty.

"Good." They started walking. "And Lathan, just don't think too much about things we can't understand. Concentrate on solid things, like good marks."

"Sure," Lathan replied. "And a pro contract with the Giants maybe when I graduate."

"Right," Mike said. "Those are the things that count."

But he knew neither he nor Lathan really believed that.

They had walked perhaps fifty feet when Mike stopped and groped for Lathan's shoulder. "Are you all right, Professor?"

Mike was definitely not all right. It felt as though the world had reversed and was suddenly going the other way. Nausea clawed at his stomach.

"I don't feel very well. If you could just steer me toward home—"

"It's not far. Come on. Lean on me."

Mike accepted the offer but at the same time tried not to make a public spectacle of himself. Under suspicion as he was, it wouldn't take much to start a rumor questioning his habits with Lathan pulled into the scandal.

Mike straightened. "I can make it all right now, I think."

"Maybe it was something you ate," Lathan said hopefully.

"That could be it."

They symptoms were not the same, however. It had seemed as though someone or something had seized his mind and tried to tear it out by the roots. The physical reaction had stemmed purely from a quick mental and emotional upheaval. Of that, he was sure, and he had to get home and into seclusion because it wasn't over. There would be more, and he had to get behind a locked door.

That door seemed a thousand miles away, but Mike made it while still holding himself together. And Lathan's concern didn't make things easier. Lathan stood by anxiously.

"Maybe I'd better come in and stick around a while."

"No, I'm fine now. We'll talk again sometime. Thanks for sticking with me."

He practically slammed the door in Lathan's face and went into the living room and dropped onto the lounge. So this is how it feels to lose your mind, he thought. But there was a grim satisfaction from holding out and making it home.

Instinctively, he kept right on trying to hold himself together. The objective mind. The impersonal, analytical attitude. That was the ticket. That would be something to hold onto. He even savored and clung to the words. They were tangibles in the violent mental storm that was howling around inside him.

Objective. Impersonal. The scientist who sits observing the affect of self-administered poison; taking notes.

Mike looked around for something to take notes on but there was nothing.

Then his mind came loose and was blown away in the storm . . .

He knew instantly that it was the end of one of his splinter lives. But it wasn't so bad. That knowledge, that feeling, came to him in a split second, if indeed time was involved at all . . .

It wasn't so bad because they had him doped up real good. He was tranquil as all hell, even there in the chair. Angry, too, and the anger was good. It gave him something to lean on as he looked into the faces of the witnesses lined up on the benches. He saw one of the newspaper guys—not enjoying it a bit—lean close to another. His moving lips looked like: "Barbarous custom, electrocution. Better with gas—the way they do it in California."

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

Maybe that was what the guy had said.

After it was over, he'd go back to his paper and try to write some hot copy that would sell an extra edition. Maybe something like: *Today I saw a man strapped into the electric chair*—beginning that way, maybe.

But that wasn't important. The important thing was Big Frank getting clear. That lying slob.

"... Somebody's got to take the rap, kid. You'll get a few years and then before you know it I'll have you out on a pardon. This is just a rough spot we gotta get over..."

That lying slob.

The chair.

Then, as they checked the straps at his wrists and ankles and the faces of the witnesses loomed white there beyond the glass, he had the weirdest thought. Maybe from the dope or the fight to keep from showing chicken or something like that, but the thought came as though it had been pushed into his mind right out of the air:

There is a dignity in death wherever or however it is met. Natural or violent, self-inflicted or resisted, there is a dignity in death. The living look at the dead and whatever callousness they show, they still stand in awe because the dead know what they the living have still to learn and they yearn for the knowing but dread its moment of coming. And the dead, knowing, have dignity. They...

Yeah, he was doped up real good.

Any second, now.

Big Frank.

That slob...

13

THEY'D TRANQUILIZED HIM. He was aware of this; also that a conference was going on there in his bedroom.

He heard Lathan Mott's voice: "He acted kind of weird when I talked to him. Then he got sick and I brought him home. He wanted to be alone but I was worried and I hung around outside and after while he came out again. I said hello but he acted like he'd never seen me before and walked away. I followed him and he went into the chapel."

"I always suspected a religious compulsion." That was Bell's voice; probably hovering around to protect his fifty bucks a week, Mike thought vaguely. He wondered why he had ever taken Bell seriously. Then he realized he was being unfair. He'd expected too much from the psychiatrist.

"I went up behind him in a pew where I could stay close and he began to pray. But he prayed real wild.

He kept talking about Greta and how he had to know how she was."

"A friend of his who is ill, perhaps?" Vincent Wonderly's gentle voice, and it occurred lazily to Mike that Wonderly would make a good Christ in a passion play. He had the voice, the manner, and the image.

"Perhaps," Paul Bender agreed.

"Then he talked about some guy he'd crashed with in the mountains."

"He never mentioned any flying experience to me," Bell said.

A new voice cut in. "Before I quieted him down, he asked if the atomic destruction had been cleared up yet. He said something about an electrocution and then cursed all the barricaded villages."

Mike decided that was the doctor. He vaguely remembered a struggle somewhere. In the church? Anyhow Lathan Mott had been there along with Paul Bender and then the doctor had appeared with his needle.

They were all there in his room, standing around his bed and he knew he had to evade them somehow because the time was growing short.

He seemed to be thinking in bits and snatches and this annoyed him. He'd get the tag end of a thought but all the thoughts had question marks at the end of them where they broke off; no thread he could follow intelligently; all the threads breaking until he felt like a man crawling around in a big ball of smothering yarn.

The time short—why? Where did he have to go? What did he have to do that was so important? And why did he feel as though he was wearing a strait jacket with all these jokers and the room and the drugs inside him as part of the restraint garment that held him prisoner?

He'd lost his mind. That was it. He'd gone insane, but

now he knew that even insanity had a pattern to it. Insanity itself was a means to an end. But what end? A padded cell in an asylum?

He was tired, very tired and now Lathan's voice came only faintly. "This guy he crashed with broke his leg and he was kind of like explaining it to God—that's what it sounded like. He said he'd passed the test. He'd earned the right to go wherever it was he wanted to go."

Very, very tired. But he had to hang on. He couldn't black out. He had to hang on and get rid of these jokers because whatever it was he wanted to do couldn't be done under restraint.

"He never mentioned a Greta to me, either," Bell was saying.

"Perhaps," Wonderly suggested, "if we found her and brought her here—"

"I never heard of her either," Lathan said. "There's a girl—Donna Wayne here at school. He went around with her I think. Shall I call her?"

Officious little schoolboy! Why didn't he mind his own business? Why didn't they all get out?

Greta.

She was probably dead now.

Pray.

Oh, God—

"No. I don't think he'd want to see Donna."

Good old Bender. He was an idiot but he had sense.

"How about it, Doc?" Lathan asked. He was pleading for reassurance. "How about him? Has he cracked up for good? He was such a nice guy."

"He's had a complete breakdown, son. That's pretty obvious. But you must never think of anyone in final terms. It doesn't work that way. I've seen apparently

hopeless cases come out of it and find even greater stability."

Very, very tired. But he must not black out. There wasn't time to black out. No time for rest. The situation was too urgent.

Well, maybe just a few little minutes—until they all got tired of perching around and got out.

A few little minutes.

Let go . . .

I've seen it all before . . . The lights along the shore . . .

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

"A definite religious compulsion . . ." That idiot Bell still sounding off . . .

The Lord is my shepherd . . . I shall not want . . . He leadeth me beside the still waters and maketh me to lie down . . .

. . . They were bent upon crucifying an agitator that day but it was still uncertain. Nobody knew exactly how it would go. The air was full of rumors and the mood of the people was festive with an edge of ugliness to it. They wanted somebody's blood but they didn't really care much whose.

He'd come with the rest to see how it would turn out and he'd crowded in with the dangerous mob while Pilate tried to stop them. That was funny. A Roman trying to stop a crucifixion. But Pilate really wasn't much of a Roman anyhow. All he wanted to do was keep the peace and get back to Rome and away from what he considered an exile.

The crowd was mixed. Some wanted to destroy the agitator and others wanted him spared—at least until

they could hear him speak and get a look at him and decide for themselves.

But he'd made powerful enemies and when Pilate offered them Barabbas they were willing to take him, but the sentiment against this was deliberately fostered by an organized element that circulated through the crowd. And the agitator was doomed; which might have been for the best because if the crowd got its blood things would quiet down and there would be no risk of the Roman guard plowing into the mob and killing a lot of innocent people.

Besides, the agitator probably deserved it or the feeling against him would not have been so strong.

They were all howling and bellowing and they smelled foul and he pushed his way out for a breath of fresh air—not getting any pleasure either out of the way they were abusing the agitator—tearing his clothes and mocking him and jamming thorns down on his head. This was something Pilate should have stopped and sent down to Rome to be used in one of the circuses.

He got clear of the crowd and was seeking a spot in the shade when he heard the voice.

“Will they crucify him?”

It was the blonde girl who'd watched her brother die on that avenue of crucifixion. She was thinner now. There were dark circles under her eyes. Obviously, the preceding three months had not used her well. But to him, she was more beautiful and desirable than ever. But desirable in a gentle way he did not quite understand.

“Will they crucify him?”

“I think so. Their mood is very ugly. Are you hungry? have you eaten?”

She did not appear to hear him. “It is so unjust.”

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

"What isn't unjust these days?"

"I heard him speak."

"What did he say?"

"He wasn't against the Romans. He wasn't against anyone."

"You've got to be against somebody."

"He was against hate."

"So far as the Romans are concerned, I don't think they're against him, either. They just don't care one way or another."

He had some bread in his pouch and he took it out and offered it to her. She took it and broke off a small piece and handed the rest back.

"Take it all. I can get more."

She ignored this. "He could have fled but he did not."

"Perhaps he misjudged the temper of his enemies."

"He does not deserve to die."

"They say he worked miracles. Did you see any?"

"No. But I was told about them."

"All mere rumors, no doubt."

"I don't think it mattered. I heard him speak and that was enough. He had a strength you could feel."

"Then why doesn't he use it now?"

"You don't understand."

That was what they always said. He'd talked to some of the followers of this new movement if indeed it could be called a movement. They suggested impossible ideas and then when you didn't agree with them they always said you didn't understand. They seemed to think all people were fools. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with the ideas they had. The agitator had even advised the people to pay their taxes. There had been a comical aspect to that, though. Again, rumors, this one claiming he took a coin for tax money from the mouth

of a fish. So? If you could get wealth that easily, why not pay your taxes and avoid trouble?

"When I met you before," he said, "you would not tell me your name."

"Helga," she said listlessly.

"Would you like to go home, Helga?"

Her eyes were on the gate where a lot of people crowded around. "They are bringing him out."

"Never mind that. Would you like to go home to your own land?"

They'd put a red robe on him and drops of blood flowed down from the thorn crown they'd put on his head; something about his having called himself a king.

"I would go with you, guard you, protect you."

"They will make him carry his own cross?"

"I suppose so. The land you came from must be very beautiful. Wouldn't you like to go back?"

She reached out and took his hand. It was the first time she had ever touched him and the touch held his entire attention. But hers was elsewhere, upon the harassed agitator, and she said, "We must not desert him now. We must go with him."

This annoyed him. "Haven't you seen enough blood and cruelty? You sat at the feet of your own brother while he died. Wasn't that enough?"

"We must go with him."

"Oh, very well . . ."

The trip was long and hot because the agitator had been brought close to death already. He struggled along with the heavy cross on his shoulder and it was plain ridiculous because any fool could see that he would never make it.

There were women with him, his mother, they said, and some others he'd picked up along the way. One was

a prostitute and it was said that he'd done his movement great damage by accepting her. It had outraged the priests. But the priests seemed to be his greatest enemies and they had found many excuses for reviling him.

Finally, impatient with the slowness, the soldiers made an observer help the agitator with the cross; and high time, because a storm was coming up. When they reached the crucifixion hill, the sky was overcast with dark clouds and there was no sun.

"Come," he said. "Let's go back now. It will rain soon and you will need shelter."

"I must stay."

Women could be so unreasonable! "That's so foolish. This is nothing of importance. An ordinary, every-day execution. It will be forgotten by morning. But if fever touches your throat you might easily die."

"I must stay."

So they stayed for the whole bloody business. The rain and storm held off until after it was over and the thunder broke into a really impressive downpour with great lightning flashes overhead while the soldiers gambled for the agitator's cloak.

They went down from the hill then, with the others—all but the guards and the agitator's immediate group—to find shelter.

When they got back to the city and found a place under an overhanging wall, he drew Helga close into his arms while she shivered and the heavens were rocked by the storm. Concerned by her trembling and her weariness, he fretted.

"Why must they go ahead with these affairs regardless of the weather? They would have drawn a much bigger crowd on a sunny day."

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Later, after she had rested and felt better, they started north.

But it was an ill-starred journey because they were attacked by brigands some three hundred miles north of Rome.

Greta was taken after he was killed trying to defend her . . .

14

MIKE LAY listening to the newscast:

"The assessment of world damage from the brief atomic war is now almost complete. Fortunately, three quarters of the United States was spared. With the government reformed in Houston, Texas, the work of rescue and rehabilitation went into gear in remarkably short order. But the task was stupendous with our Great Lakes cities in ruins, the upper eastern seaboard devastated and the country from Lake Michigan to the Atlantic coast in total panic.

"The most fortunate aspect of the holocaust was the quick reestablishment of communication with Russia, and the uncovering of the Red Chinese plot to destroy the western world through an atomic coup originating in the communist-held reaches of the Himalayas. The joint retaliation of the allied forces of the United States and Russia, aimed not at the secret Chinese atomic in-

stallations, but at the sprawling heartland of China itself, was a world-saving move. Investigation has still to be made, but the devastation is certainly beyond description and when the details are known, they will stagger the imagination.

"Those of us who still remain on earth have a mountainous task before us. Operation Survival has only begun. The problems facing us in this sudden new world will test us for many generations to come. The world as we knew it has vanished and our survival is still far from certain.

"But we shall strive. Most of our scientific knowledge still exists in the minds of those scientists who survived atomic destruction. But above all else, we have the iron will of the remaining peoples of earth to survive and build a better world on the ashes of the old . . ."

Greta, returning from the food line, hurried into the rude, makeshift domicile when she heard the radio. She snapped it off.

"You aren't supposed to tax yourself," she said.

"It was only a lot of words anyhow," he replied and took her hand in his and drew her down beside him.

"We should save the batteries for important announcements."

He smiled. "Do you know what the most important one is? I love you. I love you more than any man has a right to love a woman. During all that time when I was out of my head—"

She put a finger on his lips. "It's so strange how we came together," she said. "And how we *knew*."

"Every man and woman who meet and find that they are in love probably feel the same way."

"I suppose so."

There was something in Greta that forbade outward

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showings of emotion, but there was deep feeling behind her action as she bent down and brushed his lips with hers.

"It seems as though I'd known you from time immemorial," she whispered. "I can't explain it, but from the first moment I saw you there on the road—"

"Probably every man and woman who are in love feel that way, too."

"You didn't," she replied softly. "You're such a realist. And because you're such a realist, I'll go fix you some broth now."

The jerry-built community had a battery of stoves in the common kitchen and Greta left to go there. A few moments later, Paul Bender looked in.

"You're awake. Feeling better?"

"I'll be up and about in a few days."

"Hardly that, but do you feel up to talking a bit?"

"Until that bride of mine gets back. Then she'll put a stop to it. How are things going out there?"

"Pretty good. The Red Cross and the Government people are all in from the south now and permanent hospitals are going up fast. Routines will be established very soon."

"They've got a big job ahead. It's amazing how many survived."

Bender seemed to be having a hard time saying what he wanted to say. "There's something I wanted to tell you—"

"Not bad news, I hope."

"I want to thank you. That's about what it amounts to. The day we met, there on the barricade, when Greta was shot, you brought us to our senses. We were animals at that moment—scared, vicious animals."

"It was a bad time for everybody. Survival was the key to every action."

"But we were standing against our own. It was as though civilization had taught us nothing."

"All I did was to turn into a beast myself and try to tear everybody to pieces."

"You shamed us. I don't quite know how it came about, but if you hadn't lunged in with your bare fists—if you'd cringed and crawled away—I don't know. It's hard to recall now—hard to reconstruct that attitude of fear and desperation. All I know is that your action was the trigger. Somehow, you made us cast our lot with the rest of suffering humanity."

Mike didn't bother to dispute Bender's claim. There was no point. That terrible moment had come and gone. He could not even reconstruct his own reaction to seeing Greta fall; to thinking that they had killed her. The wound had been superficial, thank God. But then he'd charged in and taken the rough one from the rifle of the young blonde kid. They told Mike later that he hadn't gone down. He'd kept right on coming. But he didn't recall that. He couldn't recall anything that had really happened. He knew only the wild, crazy nightmares he'd gone through since; while they despaired of his life. It was strange as hell, what forms these high fever hallucinations could take.

"The boy—he hasn't been to see me."

"Lathan Mott? He's been wanting to come."

"Send him in . . ."

Somehow, in the mixed-up mass of his nightmares, the young giant had predominated. And it was maddening in a way. Lying there waiting, after Paul Bender had left, Mike knew there had been order and pattern to his dreams. But he just couldn't remember. Just as well,

probably, but it seemed as though he'd led countless lives there on that bed.

The boy came. "How are you feeling, Mr. Strong?"

"Pretty good, Lathan."

"I'm sorry for what happened. I really didn't mean to shoot you. It was—"

"Let's not talk about it. Bender tells me things are going well in the camp."

"I guess so. As well as can be expected. The hospital is a pretty terrible place. A lot of them are dying and maybe it's just as well. There's been so much agony—so much suffering."

"Where did you go to school, Lathan?"

"At Benton High."

"No college?"

"No, I quit to go to work."

"You'd have been a star football player."

"Maybe, but I never cared much about athletics."

"What are you going to do now?"

Lathan shrugged. "Does anybody know what they're going to do? Play it by ear, I guess."

"Things will straighten out again. There'll be tremendous opportunities for everyone."

Lathan smiled, and Mike was so certain he'd seen him someplace before that he searched his memory desperately. But it was no use. Somewhere in those crazy dreams, he supposed. And he wondered if those recollections would ever go. He knew he'd be spending a lot of time trying to reconstruct the nightmares of other places and times that had visited upon him in the crazy world of the unconscious.

There were baseless impressions, of course, and one of these recurred to a point that it had become a back-drop for all his thinking.

Greta had pulled him through. Greta's image, sure, beautiful, powerful, had glowed in all the dreams he'd experienced. And something mystic deep inside, told him there was more to it than wispy dreams; something as solid and real just back behind the veil as reality itself.

Nonsense, of course. As nonsensical as the quick thought he'd had the first moment he'd laid eyes on her—that he'd known her since the world began and would keep on knowing her forever.

She's called him a realist, but that wasn't true. He had a lot of vague ideas he'd never voiced and never would; that there was a lot more to a human being than showed on the surface; and a lot more to the world. Once he'd been dead certain that reality wasn't at all the way people saw it; that nothing was bigger or farther away than anything else.

A crazy idea and a man was stupid to let his mind wander in such directions.

Lathan left before Greta came back and when she arrived, she made him eat the soup and then he said, "That boy who shot me—I like him a lot."

"He's a nice boy. I want to keep in touch with him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It just seems like the right thing to do. Maybe I can help him."

"Perhaps. But you must rest now . . ."

Mike closed his eyes and cleared his mind and went to sleep . . .

Mike awoke and looked around. He was in a white, hospital bed and Paul Bender was in the room.

"How do you feel?"

"Terrible. What am I doing here?"

"You had a crackup. Don't you remember anything?"

"I seem to recall making an idiot of myself in the chapel."

"You're probably magnifying it."

"What does the doctor say? I'm not really sick."

"You've had a rough time. You'll have to stay put for a while."

"I feel weak as a cat."

"That figures."

"I did make a fool of myself, didn't I?"

"Forget that part of it. Did you just get back from one of your splinter lives?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That was something you said."

"About a splinter life? You lost me. What's a splinter life?"

"A curious state of mind a man gets into sometimes, I guess."

"Honestly, I don't have much recollection about that last few days—or the last few weeks, for that matter."

"In plain terms, Mike, you had a nervous breakdown. Do you remember our talking about consciousness and awareness and a possible difference between the two?"

"Can't say that I do."

"About a man possibly having several consciousnesses but being *aware* of only one at a time?"

"Some random conversation we had?"

Bender paused before answering. "Yes, a random conversation."

"Then why bring it up now?"

"I was just testing your recall power."

Mike smiled. "It's pretty weak. I can't even remember what I ate the last time I had breakfast. I had some weird dreams, though. It seems that I was—"

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"You can tell me about them some other time. They only gave me fifteen minutes."

After Bender left, Mike tried to catch at the tag ends of thoughts that drifted aimlessly through his mind. Those crazy hallucinations. Maybe he'd try to reconstruct them some time.

But he knew he wouldn't try. It would be silly. A waste of time. There was nothing there.

Nothing there at all . . .

THE END

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simultaneously
in the present,
deep past
and far future—
and death threatened
each life!**



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